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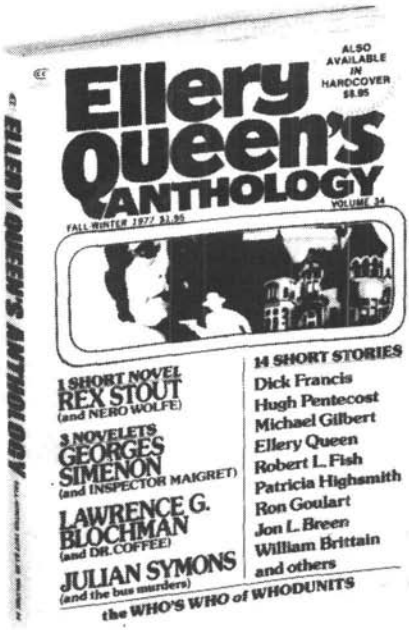

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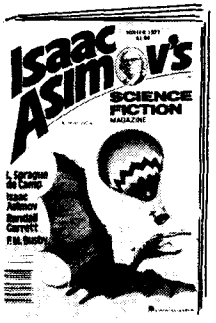

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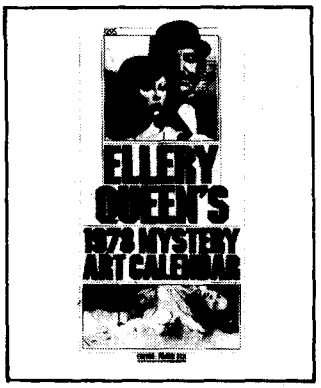

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a *NEW* short story by

STANLEY ELLIN

We are happy, with this year coming to an end, to bring you Stanley Ellin's annual short story written especially for Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine—the tale of a generation in the life-history of the Wicks family . . . In "Twelfth Night; or, What You Will" Shakespeare wrote: "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." Howard Wicks fitted one of those categories . . .

THE FAMILY CIRCLE

by STANLEY ELLIN

That day—it happened to be the very same day President Truman scored his upset victory at the polls over Thomas E. Dewey—Howard, then in his senior year at college, walked into his dormitory room, and his roommate said, "Oh, there, Wicks, there's something you ought to know."

"Yes?" said Howard, a little surprised to find his roommate in such a loquacious mood. From first acquaintance the two of them had got along nicely by almost never addressing each other. This was not out of animosity. The roommate was a cadaverous, unkempt genius at science, sweating it out on a full scholarship, forever deep in his books, who had made it plain from the outset that he had no time whatsoever for idle conversation. Howard, plump, neat as a pin, and not a genius at anything, had been tongue-tied from childhood in the presence of any member of the human race, including his immediate family. For as long as he could remember, he had suffered from the deep-rooted conviction that as soon as he opened his mouth and let a word out he was being weighed and found wanting.

Now, on being addressed at this unusual length by his roommate, he said a little warily, "What ought I to know?" and the

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roommate said, "Your father just died. Some kind of car crash. Your sister phoned and wants you to get home right away."

So Howard took the plane home to Midlandsville, Minnesota, that night and never came back to college again. He intended to—or, more precisely, he didn't intend *not* to—but, as it turned out, he never did. Not even to pack and ship home his belongings. At the close of term when he was planning to go east and attend to this chore, his mother firmly pointed out that the college authorities could very well attend to it for him, and that was how it was attended to.

As it turned out, it never did matter that Howard failed to earn a diploma. He had reluctantly entered college only because it was the thing to do and because money was certainly no problem. And it happened to be a faraway and very Ivy League college because his mother's father had been a distinguished alumnus of it—captain of the football team in his time, president of the senior class—and his mother had maintained a sentimental regard for the place.

What Howard himself had found there were three years of unalloyed loneliness. Lonely even in the bosom of the family, he was at least identifiable to those around him. At college he sometimes had the feeling that he had simply become invisible. A competent if not shining student, he was the one least likely to be called on in class. And on those rare occasions when he was called on, it was noticeable that the instructor, whichever it was, had to do some awkward brow-wrinkling and finger-snapping before he could attach the name to the body. It was also noticeable, at least to Howard, that at any social gathering on or off campus, no matter how crowded it might be, he always had plenty of elbow room. Not rejected, really. Simply, so to speak, not present.

His only pleasure during school terms was, inevitably, a solitary pleasure. One can play golf solo, and so Howard did. A neat, consistent game of straight short drives, careful iron play, and sound putting. Very sound putting. Watching the ball find its way over a rolling green into the cup ten feet away, Howard felt he was as close to being blissfully happy as he ever could be.

Back home in Midlandsville, however, the college life now only a vaguely unpleasant memory, it seemed there wasn't much opportunity for the playing of games. The late Mr. Wicks had been his wife's zealously devoted attendant from the day he first laid eyes on her until his untimely death. It was Howard's obligation,

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his widowed mother soon let him know, to fill the gap made by his father's departure. No hypocrite, she didn't whine or wheedle or play forlorn in passing along this information. Mrs. Wicks was a strikingly handsome woman, strong-willed, sharp-tongued, and with a penchant for stating the facts as she saw them.

She was also a woman who had suffered two gross betrayals, a condition which did nothing to sweeten her prevailing mood. Howard's older sisters, Regina and Ada, as handsome and imperious as their mother, had each made what Mrs. Wicks regarded as an impossible marriage. The Wickses were by far the richest family in the area, their home on the ridge overlooking town a well-kept monument to the most extravagant late Victorian architecture and landscaping. Inevitably, as the sisters blossomed into maidenhood, the Wicks' place became a magnet for a number of highly eligible suitors. Then, abruptly, all were rejected for a pair of ruggedly virile and good-looking ineligibles who, catching the girls during the brief romantic phase of their lives, swept them off to the most commonplace of commonplace existences.

For Regina it was Vernon Birkenshaw, physical training instructor at Midlandsville High School. For Ada, only three months later, it was Thomas Dove, well-regarded by the townsfolk as the best mechanic in the Midlandsville Garage. Mr. Wicks, who had worked his way up from the bottom to make a cool million and wed into the town's most aristocratic family, rather liked his new sons-in-law. But for Mrs. Wicks one disaster following hard on another made the ultimate nightmare, the one you know you'll never wake from.

Consequently, the wedding portion in each case was the bare minimum needed to keep face in the community: a trim little house right there in the newly developed tract at the foot of the ridge. Certainly this was not what the brides had anticipated, not from their adoring and wealthy father, but it was their mother who had the last word, and so Regina and Ada had to settle for what they loudly and clearly regarded as an outright insult.

Mr. Wicks had borne up under this a little while, and then, an uneasy eye on his wife, had started to weaken. Perhaps, he suggested, a partnership for Vernon in distinguished Midlandsville Boys Academy might be in order. And considering that the Midlandsville Garage would be a sound investment, there was no good reason why Thomas should be a grease-monkey there when full ownership could be obtained for a fair price. As it hap-

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pened, Mrs. Wicks could come up with several good reasons, all having to do with heedless and ungrateful children, and that was the way things stood when a drunken driver plowed into Mr. Wicks' car at 80 miles an hour.

It was no great surprise for Regina and Ada to learn at the reading of the will that their father's entire estate was the inheritance of their unsympathetic mother. And it was small comfort to them to learn soon afterward that Mrs. Wicks, in drafting her own will, was not carrying her resentment of her daughters' unfortunate marriages to the limit and depriving them forever of what they felt was due them. Not forever, because the will divided her estate, when the time came, equally among her three children. When the time came. Meanwhile, as she put it, her daughters, having made their beds to their willful satisfaction, had better learn to lie in them. If they were so anxious to find out what life was like on a schoolteacher's salary and a garage mechanic's pay, they'd have plenty of time to do it.

Howard, retired from college life, soon came to see that if only the contending parties would keep their distance, things would not be too bad. Unfortunately, the contending parties had good reason not to keep their distance. Every Friday evening without fail there was a family dinner at the Wicks' place where Mother would serve in a style best calculated to make her guests realize their own insufficient means. There was small point to a triumph, her attitude seemed to be, if the victims couldn't be on hand to share it.

As for Regina and Ada, they were simply not taking any chances. They were allied in the same cause, but like all allies they had their suspicions of each other. Mrs. Wicks never made any secret of it that her three children were going to share alike in the loot some day. But what if one of them stepped on Mother's toes too hard before that day? What was there to prevent Mother from calling in the family lawyer and having him draft a new will cutting out the offender entirely? Not a thing. In fact, there were moments during those Friday night dinners when it seemed that Mother was looking for just such an excuse.

So there it was. And there was Howard in the middle of it. He didn't fully appreciate just how deep the middle of it was and how hot the water there until one day when his sisters chose to offer him enlightenment.

"Waiting on Mother hand and foot," Regina said to him scorn-

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fully that day. "Jumping whenever she snaps her fingers. Taking all her abuse with that sweet smile."

"For good reason," said Ada, looking wise.

"Oh, for very good reason," said Regina. "But mark my words, Howard, it won't work. It will absolutely not work."

"Absolutely not," said Ada. "If you think for one moment, Howard, that you are going to have us cut out of that will—"

Nor did Howard's stammering denial of any such intentions move his sisters in the least. As far as they were concerned, the endless little services he rendered his mother couldn't possibly be motivated by anything but greedy calculation. And as he could see with dejection, the logic was all on their side. Even outsiders getting a glimpse of his home life might well agree with them.

The sad irony of it—and although he had no bent for irony he could appreciate it in this case—was that he was more than content with the role he played in his mother's household. Finally, he had, if not a friend, a close companion. With his father and the girls at home in bygone years he had been almost invisible. The same at school, whatever school it was. But here, alone in the inescapable and overwhelming presence of his mother, he had an identity and a function. It struck him with wonder one day to realize that the aching loneliness was gone for good. No drifting along, trying to win a pleased look of recognition from some bypasser. No more solitary hours. In fact, very few solitary minutes.

To be absolutely accurate, he was not all alone with his mother. From the time Mr. and Mrs. Wicks had returned from their honeymoon there had been a housekeeping couple to tend the premises, Lorenzo for the chauffeuring, gardening, and heavy work, Mattie for the cooking and other domestic service. A morose team inclined to much *sotto voce* grumbling as they went about their duties, they had a pleasant apartment on the attic floor and seemed to find each other's company sufficient for their needs.

As time passed it came to Howard that with the exception of the cooking and housecleaning, he was absorbing their duties, one by one. He was now making all those trips to market that Mattie once made. He was now in charge of the building's maintenance, overseeing the hired hands who came in to make repairs and improvements. He was doing all his mother's chauffeuring, although, unlike Lorenzo, he had the doubtful privilege of joining the company she visited. And under her instruction, although up

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to now he had never demonstrated any interest in gardening or any talent for it, he even became something of a gardener, down on his knees among the flora while Mrs. Wicks, her broad-brimmed straw hat shielding her fine complexion from the sun, stood at his shoulder and tartly supervised.

Going far beyond Lorenzo and Mattie, he also came to serve as social partner every evening. Then Mrs. Wicks, who had a preferred list of television entertainments marking each day of the week, would have him tune in her favored programs—usually the most lachrymose of dramas—and join with her in witnessing them to the bitter end.

In the broad area of economics Howard attended to the household accounts, making out the checks for his mother to sign; supervised the supervisors of the brokerage house in town who handled Mrs. Wicks's investments; put together the tax materials for the family accountant; and served as liaison to the family lawyer. What with one thing and another, starting in the late morning when Howard carted up the breakfast tray to his mother in bed and ending after the nightly late newscast on television when, with Mrs. Wicks again settled in bed, Howard provided her with the gentle massage that helped relieve those aching neck and shoulder muscles, it made for quite a full day, seven days a week.

Yet, serving faithfully and well for small thanks, he had no complaints to make. It was Regina and Ada who, starting with that confrontation where they first opened fire on him, gave vent to the complaints. At every opportunity they let him know how they viewed the services he rendered their mother, playing the same tune over and over with only small variations.

"I don't see why she keeps on Lorenzo and Mattie," Regina told him. "Not with your waiting on her hand and foot every livelong minute of the day."

"And night," Ada put in. "Bedtime massages indeed. Anything to let poor dear Mother know how devoted her son is. Not at all like her neglectful daughters. Really, it's almost obscene, Howard, the efforts you're making to get her under your influence."

The most painful part of it for Howard was that neither of his sisters seemed to have the least idea how desperately he yearned for their affection. He had a hazy recollection of a golden period in his early childhood: little Howard being convoyed by his big sisters, each with one of his hands in a tight grip, as they merrily

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made their way down the main street of town on a shopping trip. And their comic, if sometimes painful, teasing of him when they were at their games in the playroom or in the tree house their father had built for them. A very hazy and faraway recollection, and a heartwarming one. And the way things were going, more and more a hopeless one.

Hopeless. Because while he would have been glad to prove his feelings for the sisters he cherished by handing over to them whatever they wanted of his mother's fortune he had no control over that fortune. He made out the checks, but it was Mrs. Wicks who signed them, keeping a sharp eye on every digit. Actually, in terms of cash flow, he was the poorest one of them all, wholly dependent on the few dollars his mother grudgingly allotted him now and then. He couldn't find it in himself to honestly resent this—after all, he was only a boarder in her home—but it was a nagging misery to know that he had no means of ever proving his regard for his sisters and thus winning theirs in return.

So, in this fashion, time went on as time will, 30 years of it no less, the last few of them more and more seeming to confirm Regina and Ada's grim foreboding—they openly expressed it to Howard—that their mother obviously intended to outlive them all. Approaching 75, Mrs. Wicks had withered a little, had suffered a couple of minor heart episodes which Dr. Gottschalk, leading practitioner of Midlandsville, had smilingly shrugged off as meaningless, and had developed some sharper pains in neck and shoulders which the doctor, a roughhewn and blunt-spoken fellow, had dismissed, much to her annoyance, as the natural consequences of old age. Howard's fine hand at massage, he said, was all the prescription required.

Beyond this Mrs. Wicks certainly did appear to be in excellent condition for her years, and, without question, as active, demanding, and testy as ever. Lorenzo and Mattie who were about her age, Howard took note, now looked considerably older and more fragile than she did. They still remained on, however, wispy inefficient shades of their old selves, and Howard once found himself wondering if his mother refused to pension them off only because they provided her with a cheering contrast to her own condition.

As for Regina and Ada, things had slightly improved for them in their middle-age, but only slightly. Regina's Vernon had become head of his department at the high school, but the economic advantages of this were canceled out by the twins who had come

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along—a pair of strikingly handsome, sturdy boys—and so, as Regina put it, it was still uphill all the way. Still uphill for Ada too, even though her Thomas was now manager of the Midlandsville Garage, because, as she took pains to inform her sister in Howard's presence, one properly brought-up, extremely sensitive and talented girl—her sole issue—could mean at least the expense of two crude boys.

It had very soon become clear after the arrival of her grandchildren that Mrs. Wicks was not one of your doting grandmothers. She took occasional notice of these little people but not much more. Her gifts to them—and there was no change in this policy with the passing years—were always moderately priced and, from Howard's point of view, depressingly practical. Much worse, as he saw it, was the reception the children received in his mother's home during their formative years. Mrs. Wicks objected to noise, active play, and dirtied clothing, thus making it a painful experience, it was plain, for any of the children to enter her presence. Their parents, making sure that an errant offspring didn't cost them an inheritance, firmly reinforced this code, so that Howard, who would have been the willing slave of his nephews and niece, was steadfastly denied the opportunity for it. Like it or not, he could see that he was regarded by these small stony-faced creatures as an adjunct of their formidable grandmother. When on rare occasion he worked up enough courage to offer them some token of friendship, they backed away in open alarm as if he were setting a trap for them.

This cut so deep that Howard at last presented his case to his mother. He did it during one of her pre-slumber massages when she was, if not in an amiable mood, at least in a neutral one.

"I think you're much too strict with the children, Mother, that's the trouble. They just don't enjoy being with us here."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Wicks, stretched out prone in her terry-cloth robe, her eyes closed, luxuriating in the gentle kneading of neck and shoulders. "If their own parents don't know how to bring up those children, someone had better instruct them in their manners right now."

"Mother, there's a difference between—"

"You're digging your thumbs into me, Howard. And the matter is closed. I don't want to hear any more about it."

But the matter wasn't quite closed, although the children had sprouted into their early teens before it did come up again and

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this time led to an unpredictable and astonishing explosion in the Wicks' household.

That day—a fine springtime Friday—Howard had carted up the winter blankets to the cedar chest in the attic storeroom across the hallway from Lorenzo and Mattie's apartment. There in the storeroom he had come upon his set of long-forgotten golf clubs, the complete set, along with one stained and battered ball. Wistfully he had slid the putter out of the bag and tapped the ball back and forth across the floor a few times. Then, in the very act of replacing the clubs in the bag, he had been filled by a sudden excitement.

Golf club and ball in hand, he had explored the kitchen until he turned up a can of fruit really a little too large for his purpose but all the better for that reason. He had emptied the syrupy fruit into a bowl, placed it in the refrigerator, and carefully washed out the empty can. Then, using a trowel, he had dug a proper hole in the center of the spacious lawn behind the house, had sunk the can into it, neatly replaced the turf around it, and had discovered, after a few tries, that he hadn't lost too much of his putting touch.

When Regina and Ada and their families arrived in the late afternoon Howard was ready for them. Ordinarily, during the tedious couple of hours before dinner, the children, maintaining a glum silence, kept their elders company in the living room. Now Howard, with a nod and a wink—it took several nods and winks, in fact—lured them out of the room, much to the mystification of their parents and grandmother, and led them to his one-hole golf course. When he held up the club and ball before them he saw with joy that they looked interested.

"Do you play golf, Uncle Howard?" asked one of the twins doubtfully.

"I used to," said Howard. "A long time ago."

"Let's see," said the other twin, even more doubtfully.

Howard placed the ball about six feet from the hole—it had to be a respectable distance, he knew, to make it properly impressive—and hands shaking a little on the club, stomach churning at the magnitude of this test, he sank the putt.

"Hey, there," said both nephews, and his niece said with honest admiration, "Hey, wow."

"We'll take turns," Howard said, "starting close and getting farther back."

They were raptly taking turns when the kitchen window was

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thrust up and Mattie's head appeared. "Your mother says what's going on here," she called to Howard. "And you better get inside right away."

"Is dinner ready?" Howard said.

"Not for a while, but she says come in right away. She's in a real snit, Howard."

It was decision-making time, Howard saw. He drew a deep breath and made the decision. "Whenever dinner's ready," he called to Mattie.

Two minutes later the screen door of the kitchen squealed on its hinges and Mrs. Wicks appeared there, freezing the golfers in their tracks. "Howard, what do you think you're doing? And look at that lawn, all trampled apart. Get in here at once, all of you."

Howard took another deep breath. "The lawn isn't being trampled apart, Mother. And there's plenty of time before dinner."

"Mind your manners, Howard. You will repair that disgusting hole at once, and all of you will join the company inside."

Howard looked at his companions. A minute before, they had been having a merry time of it, evidently as happy in his company as he was in theirs. Now all three faces were stony again, taking his measure. Howard turned back to the menacing figure in the doorway. "Mother, there's no need for us to . . . "

The rest of it trailed off to inaudibility as Mrs. Wicks marched down the steps and across the lawn. It had been Howard's turn at the game; the ball rested near his feet. Mrs. Wicks reached down, picked up the ball, and marched back the way she had come. It was the slamming of the screen door after her that brought Howard slowly out of his daze. Then, unaware that he was still gripping the golf club, he headed for the house in such a turmoil of emotion that he tripped going up the porch steps and nearly fell headlong.

He righted himself, pulled open the door hard enough to almost tear it from its hinges, and found his mother already reseated in her favorite armchair in the living room at the head of the family semicircle. Her cheeks were flushed, her lips compressed. The absconded golf ball was nowhere in sight.

"Mother," said Howard without ceremony, "I'd like my golf ball back."

"Indeed?" said Mrs. Wicks coolly.

"Mother—"

"Don't raise your voice, Howard. I've given that thing to Ver-

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non." Mrs. Wicks motioned with her chin at Vernon who looked thoroughly uncomfortable. "He plays golf. He'll have much more use for it than you will."

"All the same, Howard," said Vernon, embarrassedly digging into his pocket, "I don't really need—"

"No," Mrs. Wicks said sharply. "You will keep that thing, Vernon. I will not have my lawn destroyed by any foolish games."

All question about this in Vernon's mind was promptly put to rest by his wife. "Vernon," said Regina in a deadly voice, "you heard Mother, didn't you?"

He had, Howard knew. So had they all, including the children who from the doorway were taking this in. Howard stared at his mother through a red mist, feeling the blood pounding in his head so hard that it was like a series of painful blows against his skull.

Not far from Mrs. Wicks' chair, purely decorative, was a handsome little table, a square of polished marble on ebony legs. Howard raised his golf club high over his head with both hands and brought it down with savage impact on the table. Regina and Ada gave small screams. Vernon and Thomas sprang to their feet. Mrs. Wicks sat there rigid, her nostrils flaring.

Howard looked with incredulity at the crack running the width of the marble, looked at the bent shaft of the golf club, and felt all the strength drain out of him. His stomach heaved, his legs felt like rubber under him. "I'm terribly sorry, Mother," he said breathlessly.

"You should be," said Mrs. Wicks. She appeared in complete control of herself. "That table was one of your grandfather's treasures."

"It can be repaired," Howard pleaded. "I'm sure it can be repaired."

"It had better be," said Mrs. Wicks.

"Tomorrow," said Howard. "The first thing tomorrow. Meanwhile, if you'll all excuse me—"

So for the first time in all those years Howard was not at his place during a Friday dinner, but, of course, in all the years that followed, this dereliction was never repeated. As he came to see with the passing of time, it was as if the episode had never taken place. His mother never mentioned it, and no other witness to it ever brought it up. The table was repaired, and that's all there was to it. Naturally, as a sad aftermath, there was no getting close to the children again as he had that magical hour. Too bad

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really. It had, up to its shocking denouement, really been a magical hour.

The children grew up, entered the State University, dropped out of it, and went their way, the boys to share chronic unemployment in Chicago, the girl to share unwedded bliss with a dubious young man in New York. Regina and Ada aged perceptibly under these trials but lost none of their spirit in dealing with Howard. Nor was the relationship made any easier for Howard by the fact that since Mr. Wicks's death the original million bequeathed to his widow had become, under wise management, three million.

"Three million?" said Regina. "Really three million?"

"Really," said Howard apologetically. "It's been very soundly invested."

"A million dollars each," said Regina bitterly.

"And there it is," said Ada even more bitterly.

And there it was, every dollar of it tight in their mother's unyielding grasp. Even a fraction of it, Howard thought miserably, would bring smiles to those two aging faces confronting him. He didn't share their feelings, true, but he could understand them. And how good it would be to finally see those smiles turned his way. At the same time, the thought of his mother's remains being laid away under the ground, of the house empty of her presence, filled him with a cold sense of the old loneliness lying in wait for him. It was not a thought he liked to dwell on.

"I've said it once," Regina stated, "and I'll say it again. Mother is bound and determined to outlive us all."

"That includes you, Howard," said Ada.

They were wrong. At least, whatever Mrs. Wicks was bound and determined to do she didn't succeed in doing.

That night Howard was waiting for her to come out of the tub he had prepared for her—moderately hot water fortified by a cup of scented crystals—so that he could apply the usual massage. Fifteen minutes was the time she always allotted for the tub, so he waited as ever on her bedside chair, an eye on the clock. The 15 minutes went by, then 20, and Howard began to get a little uneasy. He waited a few more minutes, then knocked tentatively on the bathroom door and got no response. With nerves on edge he knocked harder. Still no response.

This, he finally told himself, was no time for modesty. He pushed open the door and saw at a glance all there was to be seen.

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The bathtub was the old-fashioned kind that stood on claw feet, and it was long and deep enough for anyone to stretch out in at full length. Mrs. Wicks's body was stretched out in it at full length, face just under the surface of the water, wide-open eyes staring sightlessly at the ceiling.

For the life of him Howard couldn't bring himself to enter the bathroom. Instead, he pulled the door shut and stood there trying to get his wits together. Then, holding himself in tight control, he phoned Dr. Gottschalk to come at once.

"Dead?" said the doctor. "You're sure of that?"

"Yes," said Howard, the dreadful old loneliness now with a suffocating grip on him. "Please hurry, doctor."

He managed to maintain an outward composure when he went upstairs to rouse Lorenzo and Mattie with the news. Lorenzo took it well—there was even a hint of triumph in him, Howard suspected, at this information that he had outlived the lady of the house—but Mattie proved a highly emotional case. It gratified Howard, as he comforted her, to find his own composure standing up so well to this flood of tears and lamentations. Finally, almost as an afterthought once Mattie was under control, he phoned Regina and Ada.

The doctor showed up almost at once. He went quickly about his business, then said to Howard, "Of course you realize the police must be called in. I'll attend to it right now."

"The police?" Howard said.

"Legal fol-de-rol, Howard. A death under these conditions is a police matter, willy-nilly. And there must be an autopsy, too. Sorry, but that's the way it goes."

So when Regina and Ada and their husbands arrived, the police were very much present, several of them, led by an unpleasantly large and officious man who had identified himself as Lieutenant Steele. The family party looked taken aback at this display of officialdom and, seating itself in the living room, had very little to say. Still, Howard felt, it would have been comforting to have them all present when Lieutenant Steele, at his overbearing worst, said that he now wanted Howard to describe in detail the events leading up to the death. This comfort was not granted Howard, however, because the lieutenant led him away for a private interview in the sitting room across the hall where Howard told all there was to tell and the lieutenant laboriously recorded it all in a small notebook.

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But at last it was all over, and when the body was removed to a waiting ambulance the family was first to depart, offering the briefest of farewells on its way out, then the police took their leave, and Dr. Gottschalk alone remained for a parting word.

"Think you can use a sedative?" the doctor asked.

"No, thank you," said Howard, thinking he probably could.

"If you say so. Anyhow, stay by the phone tomorrow. I'll try to have the medical examiner get the autopsy report to me by noon."

The call came at precisely noon. "No unusual marks on the body," said Dr. Gottschalk bluntly. "No signs of drugs. Looks like she blacked out in the bath and just went under. I warned her more than once about those hot baths."

"She never told me that," said Howard.

"No, she wouldn't, I suppose. It might have meant your tattling to me about it, and your mama always did know how to have things her way, didn't she? Well, any time you want to claim the body, Howard—"

The funeral was elaborate and well-attended, and Howard, watching the shovelfuls of earth fall with thuds on the coffin, manfully managed to restrain tears that were very near the surface. Just as he had anticipated, the chilling loneliness was always with him now, spelling out his bleak future. So when the ceremony was over he was gratified that Regina, as if to demonstrate an unexpected sensitivity to his feelings, should propose that the family members gather together in the old house, where Mattie and Lorenzo could easily enough whip up a lunch. He was even more gratified at the way the others instantly nodded agreement.

Back in the house they gathered in the living room, all taking their familiar seats, with Mrs. Wicks's empty chair a powerful presence among them, while Regina gave Mattie her instructions and sent her off to the kitchen. As soon as Mattie was out of the room Regina drew its heavy double doors tight shut. The shining brass key in the lock had, within Howard's memory, never been used, but now it was. Regina twisted it firmly, locking the doors and testing them to make sure they were locked. When Howard looked surprised at this she said tersely, "Mattie can be an awful busybody, you know. This is no time for her to come barging in here."

"It isn't?" said Howard.

"No," said Regina. She seated herself and fixed her eyes on

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Howard. At last she said, "I guess this shouldn't be brought out into the open at all, Howard, even behind locked doors. But if I didn't come out with it, it would stick in my throat the rest of my life."

"We all feel that way, Howard," said Ada.

"So," said Regina, "I'll speak my piece, Howard, and then never again will any of us even touch on the subject." She pointed to the small marble-topped table which had been so perfectly repaired that the damage once done to it was impossible to detect. "All those years ago, Howard, when you smashed that thing right in front of us all—well, we had the idea that some day you might—just possibly might—have the nerve to do what had to be done in this house."

"And you did," said Ada. "It took a long, long time, but you did, didn't you, Howard?"

Howard stared at them with disbelief and then with mounting horror. His mouth opened, but he couldn't seem to find words that would properly express the horror.

"And the way you handled it," said Regina's Vernon. "Putting it over on a tough old coot like Dr. Gottschalk."

"And," said Ada's Thomas with a broad wink, "not to mention whatever song and dance you gave that mean-looking cop."

Howard finally found his voice, although it was hard for him to recognize it as his voice. "Now look here. If any of you believes for one minute—"

"Oh, *come on*, Howard," said Regina with amusement. "You know we'll keep this in the family. Really, you don't have to play games with us."

And she was, Howard saw, smiling at him. She was bright-eyed with admiration, smiling with affection. And so was Ada. And Vernon. And Thomas. All of them were actually smiling at him with open and honest and long-overdue affection.

Howard allowed himself a few seconds to consider the future. Then he smiled back at them. "Well," he said, "as long as it's kept in the family—"

"Q"

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a NEW detective story by

JACK RITCHIE

Three members of the same jury murdered—sounds like an old gimmick, doesn't it? But murdered by a dead man? And that's only the first of a surprising number of twists, turns, and turnabouts in this Ritchie rib-tickler. Humor-and-homicide—Jack Ritchie's special blend of what might be called "chuckling criminology. . ."

HUNG JURY

by JACK RITCHIE

I had just returned from my vacation and Ralph began filling me in on the case assigned to us.

"Three members of the jury were murdered," he said.

I nodded wisely. "Ah, yes. I see it all. The jury convicted a felon and he swore he would get his revenge."

"Not quite," Ralph said. "Actually it was a hung jury. Four for acquittal and eight for conviction."

"But of course," I said. "So the criminal promptly proceeded to kill three of the jurors who had voted for his conviction."

"Not that either, Henry. All three of the jurors murdered had voted for his acquittal."

"Why the devil would he want to murder three jurors who voted for his acquittal?"

"He didn't really murder anybody, Henry. He couldn't because he was dead."

"Ralph," I said patiently, "if you keep interrupting, I never will get to the nubbin of this case. Start at the beginning."

"Last year," Ralph said, "one Mike Winkler was arrested for the murder of a Jim Hurley. Both of them had long records for breaking-and-entering. They had just finished a job and they got into an argument about how they should divide the loot. Winkler

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pulled a gun and shot Hurley four times, which was enough to kill him. Somebody in a neighboring apartment heard the shots and called the police. They arrived to find Winkler sitting on his couch trying to figure out what to do with Hurley's body. Winkler confessed on the spot that he had killed Hurley and why."

"That should have wrapped it all up."

"Unfortunately, as soon as Winkler got hold of a lawyer, or vice versa, he withdrew the confession. Said he'd been beaten into making it by the arresting officers."

"Was he?"

"No. You know how it is in the department. If one of us does any roughing up, everybody learns about it in time. That doesn't mean that we fall all over ourselves to let the public know. But it's no big secret among ourselves, and nobody laid a finger on Winkler. Anyway, his story was that he went out for a newspaper and when he came back he found Hurley dead and the gun on the floor. But even without the confession, the case against him was still solid as a rock—powder grains on his hands, fingerprints on the murder gun, and so forth."

"But still the jury refused to convict him?"

"It was just one of those things that happen every now and then. You get a balky jury that believes what it wants to believe no matter what the evidence. Maybe it has something to do with the phases of the moon. The jury deliberated for five days without reaching a verdict and the judge finally dismissed it."

"Winkler went free?"

"No. He was taken right back to the county jail while the gears of justice meshed to try him for a second time with a new jury. But there never was a second trial. While Winkler waited, he managed to saw his way out of his cell and steal a car on the street. A squad car spotted him and the chase began. It finally ended when Winkler crashed into another car on a freeway ramp. Both Winkler and the driver of the other car were killed outright."

Faintly I remembered reading about it in the newspapers.

"It happened on the twenty-second of January, this year," Ralph went on. "And now we move on to the twenty-second of the next month, February. One Amos Albee, a bachelor, age thirty-six, accountant, was found hanging by the neck from a rafter in his garage. It was assumed he got onto a chair, slipped the noose around his neck, and then stepped off."

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"He didn't leave a suicide note?"

"No. But then many suicides don't. Albee's background indicated that he was a loner, melancholy by nature, and so it looked like he'd gotten a little more melancholy than usual and decided to end it all. And then exactly one month later, on the twenty-second of March, a Cora Anderson was found dead, also by hanging, in the laundry room of her apartment building. Cora was in her sixties, a widow in bad health, and it appeared that the loneliness of her life and her sickness had gotten too much for her and she decided to end her life."

"I gather that both Cora and Amos were members of the hung jury and that they had voted for Winkler's acquittal?"

"Yes, but at the time nobody connected them in any way. Who's to remember the names of the jurors in any of the dozens of trials going on in the courthouse every month? Besides, we get an average of ten suicides a month."

I alertly grasped the situation. "And then a third juror committed suicide, so to speak, and it took place on the twenty-second of the month following? April?"

"Exactly. Gerald Hawkins, a widower, retired, aged sixty-six, was found hanged in his basement. No suicide note either."

"But now somebody finally got suspicious?"

Ralph nodded. "Jurors get paid for their jury duty, but paperwork being what it is, it wasn't until July that the checks went out in the mail. Nine of them were delivered and accepted, but three of the envelopes were returned, addressees unknown. The City Clerk's office sent a man out to the last-known addresses to talk to neighbors and try to come up with some forwarding addresses. He discovered that all three of the jurors had hanged themselves. It seemed like just too much coincidence, so the City Clerk took the whole thing to the police. That was last week, while you were still on your vacation. By the way, where did you go?"

"Noplace. I stayed home and read and watched the educational channel on television. Also I did some Double-Crostics. Very refreshing and relaxing."

Ralph studied me for a moment and then continued. "We went back to the scenes of the deaths and were able to recover the ropes used on the three jurors—neighbors keep the damnedest things for souvenirs. In our lab we matched the rope ends. In other words, all three of the ropes had come from the same length

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or coil." He paused a moment. "You stayed in your apartment the entire two weeks?"

I nodded. "Most people travel on their vacations because they feel guilty about having all that free time and doing nothing. But I never feel guilty about having time off." I pondered the case for a moment. "You said that during his escape attempt, Winkler ran into another car and killed the driver."

"James Bellington. Age twenty-eight. A steam fitter and plumber. Married. No children. He was the only one in the car."

I smiled. "Ralph, if you search Bellington's garage, or basement, I'll wager you will find a coil of rope whose end exactly matches one end of the rope used on the third juror. My theory is that his wife was so traumatically affected by his death that she systematically hunted down every one of the jurors responsible for the—"

"We searched," Ralph said. "No rope. Besides, Bellington and his wife were separated and in the process of getting a divorce. She was minimum sad about his death, especially since she was still his life-insurance beneficiary."

"What about grieving relatives? Brother, sister, parents? Girl friend?"

"None. Bellington's parents are dead and he had no brother or sister. Also no girl friend."

I tried again. "What about the man Winkler shot? Who was unduly affected by his death?"

"Nobody. Hurley ran away from an orphan asylum at the age of fifteen. No relatives and no friends, except for the man sho shot him."

I stroked my chin thoughtfully. "And yet it appears that someone has been commemorating the date of Bellington's death by *executing a juror on the same day of succeeding months.* Clearly someone is saying that if it weren't for the hung jury, Winkler would have been safely stowed in a maximum-security state prison rather than in our flimsy county jail where he had the opportunity to escape and subsequently cause the death of Bellington." I frowned. "Since we cannot find anyone personally devastated by Bellington's death, we must assume that somewhere out there in this city there is a dedicated nut who has taken it upon himself to balance the scales of justice. He could be any one of a million people."

"Possibly," Ralph said. "But on the other hand, looking closer to home, we find that the Winkler jury members were practically at

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each other's throats after five days of deliberation. The eight who voted for Winkler's conviction felt quite strongly that it was a miscarriage of justice not to find Winkler guilty of murder."

I nodded judiciously. "One of those eight jurors must be our murderer."

"We were able to establish that each of the murders must have occurred between ten and twelve in the evening. And if we assume that one person committed all three of the murders, we can eliminate six of the jurors for one reason or another. They have solid alibis for one, two, or all three of the murders."

I rapidly subtracted six from eight. "Ralph, I believe we've narrowed it down to two persons."

Ralph agreed. "One of them is an Elmer Poulos. Age twenty-eight. Physical culture enthusiast. Works in a florist shop at the Mayfair shopping center. The other is Deirdre O'Hennessey. She's twenty-five and has a job as a secretary in a construction firm."

"Ralph," I said, "when we have a chain of murders like this, the murderer's insufferable ego usually impels him to leave something in the nature of a signature at the scene of each crime. Something more personal than just matching rope ends."

Ralph nodded. "Good for you, Henry. After we decided it was murder, we went over everything again with a fine-tooth comb. We found a small cross, about half an inch in size, scratched on the underside of each of the chairs supposedly used by the suicides."

"Hmm," I said. "What kind of cross was it, Ralph? Latin? Lorraine? Celtic? Maltese?"

"Just a plain ordinary cross." He drew one on a sheet of paper.

"Ah," I said. "The Greek cross. Unless, of course, you tilt it forty-five degrees to either the left or the right. In which case, it becomes a Cross of St. Andrew's."

Ralph and I went downstairs to the police garage where we picked up our car and drove it to the Mayfair shopping center. At the florist shop we talked to the owner who directed us to a room at the rear of the store.

We found Elmer Poulos, a muscular young man in a T-shirt, making a funeral wreath.

Ralph introduced me. "This is Sergeant Henry Turnbuckle. My regular partner. He'd like to ask you a few questions."

I nodded. "I will get directly to the point. I understand that you have no alibi for any of the nights of the murders."

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He smiled happily. "Absolutely none. I always go to sleep at nine thirty and alone. I have to get a good night's rest so that I can lift the weights."

Ralph studied him. "We think that the murderer first subdued his victims, possibly with chloroform, then put a noose around their necks and hoisted them to the ceiling. Which means that our murderer must be quite a strong man."

"Not necessarily, Ralph," I said. "The murderer could have simply pointed a gun at his victims and ordered them to get on the chair and slip the noose around their necks. Then the murderer kicked the chair away."

"Now, Henry," Ralph said, "I find it hard to believe that his victims would cooperate with him to that extent."

Poulos agreed. "I'll bet that ninety-nine percent of the people on this earth would rather be shot than hanged."

"True enough," I said, "*if* the victims were absolutely certain they were really about to be hanged. But I suspect that being human and hopeful, they thought that it might just be some kind of bad practical joke and that the best thing to do was to humor the gunholder by cooperating to a point. They would get on the chairs and put the nooses around their necks. Having the chairs kicked out from under them would come as somewhat of a surprise."

Poulos dissented. "Personally I go with the chloroforming and the hoisting."

I regarded him pointedly. "If that was indeed the method used, then you are certainly our most logical suspect."

Poulos beamed. "I don't mind being a logical suspect. Just as long as you can't prove anything. I'm getting a lot of respect around here now. They think maybe I did it. I mean working in a flower shop isn't all that macho and you need all the help you can get."

A thought came to me. "Ralph, Bellington was killed on the twenty-second of January and then on the twenty-second of each succeeding month—February, March and April—another juror was hanged. But why wasn't the *fourth* juror murdered on the twenty-second of May? It was certainly his turn. Why did the murderer stop killing? He still had one more juror to go. And yet the twenty-second of May passed and there was no dead fourth juror. Why? Did the murderer forget his name? His address? Who is the fourth juror who voted for acquittal?"

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Ralph was about to give me the name, but then he eyed Poulos and changed his mind. "The fourth juror is a woman of thirty. Married, with four children, the oldest twelve."

I frowned in cogitation. "Every one of the murdered jurors was single. Alone. In other words their deaths affected no one but themselves. Is it really too much to postulate that the murderer stopped killing because his heart weakened at the prospect of murdering a woman with four minor children?" I turned to Poulos. "Do you like children?"

He thought about that. "Would it be un-American if I said not particularly?"

I cunningly questioned Poulos for another half hour, but gained nothing additional.

When we left Poulos, Ralph drove to an apartment building on the east side. We took the elevator up to the fourth floor.

I glanced at my watch. "Ralph, you said this Deirdre O'Hennessey is a secretary. However, since this is a weekday and therefore a workday, I predict you won't find her home."

"She'll be home," Ralph said. "She's still on her vacation."

Deirdre O'Hennessey had raven hair and extremely violet eyes. She regarded Ralph. "Oh, it's you again."

She let us into her apartment.

I glanced about the room, noticing that she had evidently been working on a Double-Crostic when we rang. I recognized it as one I'd completed several days before.

"Miss O'Hennessey," I said, "I understand you have absolutely no alibi for the nights on which the three jurors were murdered."

She agreed. "None. On the other hand, I doubt very much if I would have had the strength to tie a rope around anybody's neck and hoist him to the ceiling."

I smiled wisely. "We in the department have the suspicion that the hangings might have been accomplished without the need of any strength at all. Do you have a revolver? A threatening weapon of any kind?"

She nodded. "I have a crossbow in the closet. I really don't know what to do with it, but it was on sale and I just couldn't resist it."

I considered the picture. Did she point a crossbow at the quailing? . . .

Deirdre O'Hennessey sat down beside the Double-Crostic. "What is a six-letter word for any of a group of isomeric hydrocarbons of the paraffin series? The second letter has to be a 'c'."

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"Octane," I said.

She stared at me for a second and then lettered in the word. She looked up. "I have a question. Three of the four jurors who voted for Winkler's acquittal were murdered. Why not the fourth?"

"We don't know," Ralph said.

I found myself chortling.

They looked at me and Ralph said, "Henry, why are you chortling?"

"Ralph, I know who the killer is."

Ralph studied me and then nodded. "All right, Henry, who is the murderer?"

"Well, I don't actually know his name. But it all reminds me of Jack the Ripper."

Clearly I had their undivided attention.

"Why does it all remind you of Jack the Ripper?" Ralph asked.

I smiled. "Well, Jack the Ripper had a pattern too. He murdered a number of women and then as suddenly as the killings began, they stopped. Why?"

"I give up, Henry," Ralph said. "Why?"

"No one knows for certain, Ralph. But there are a number of theories advanced—that he decided the risk was becoming too great, that he finally saw the error of his ways, that he lost interest, and so on. Anyway, to my mind, the theory which holds the most water is that the killings stopped simply because Jack the Ripper died—by natural causes, disease, accident, or whatever.

"What I am saying, Ralph, is that our killer is dead. That is why he did not murder the fourth juror. You said that six of our jurors had alibis of 'one sort or another.'" I smiled broadly. "All right, Ralph, which one of our jurors is dead?"

"None," Ralph said.

I stared out of the window for a few moments. "On the other hand, it is entirely possible that Jack the Ripper emigrated. People did a lot of emigrating in those days. Perhaps his ship was even lost at sea, which may account for the fact that there were no more Jack-the-Ripper-style murders in America, Canada, Australia, or New Zealand."

Deirdre O'Hennessey had been listening to me, obviously impressed. "Why did the murderer go through the bother of making the deaths look like suicide? Why couldn't he just kill his people and leave it at that?"

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I had the answer, of course. "Because he didn't want the police interfering before his mission was completed."

I lapsed into thought for a few moments and then chortled again.

Deirdre O'Hennessey tilted her head. "Why are you chortling now?"

"It is my theory that the murderer is off his rocker. Ralph, have head X-rays been taken of our suspects?"

"No, Henry."

"Ralph, you must agree that it is a bit unusual for a man to commit three murders for what is basically an abstract, rather than a personal, motive—that is, the desire to achieve justice. Therefore I deduce that the murderer has something wrong with his head and that this accounts for his actions. I believe X-rays are in order."

"I don't know about the legal aspects of that, Henry," Ralph said, staring at the ceiling. "It might be considered an invasion of privacy. At the very least, I think we'd have to get warrants. Why couldn't our murderer be just an ordinary run-of-the-mill psychotic?"

"You have a point there, of course," I conceded. "Or perhaps the murderer has a basal metabolism problem. Or low blood sugar. I rather think that if we X-rayed our suspects, or at least gave them a thorough physical examination, it might prove fruitful."

"What is a five-letter word for unearthly, uncanny, wild?" Deirdre asked.

I pondered. "Weird?"

She nodded. "That's it exactly."

I frowned thoughtfully. Strange. I didn't remember that particular word in the Double-Crostic.

I continued my incisive questioning of Deirdre O'Hennessey for another hour and then Ralph and I returned to headquarters.

Assistant District Attorney Orville Jepson came to our desk. "Well, did you come up with anything new on the dead jurors?"

"Nothing yet," Ralph said.

Jepson is considered to be a brilliant dedicated worker and no one has ever failed to notice his Phi Beta Kappa key.

Ralph spoke to me. "Orville handled the Winkler trial."

The memory of it darkened Jepson's brow. "The only case I ever lost. It made no sense at all. He was guilty as hell and I proved it beyond a doubt."

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Ralph tried to be consoling. "Maybe Winkler managed to bribe those jurors."

Jepson shook his head. "No. Winkler was broke. The court had to appoint an attorney for him. Besides, even if he managed to get to the jury, all he needed was to bribe one person. Not four." Jepson glowered. "I just had a stinking jury. No wonder people have no respect for our judicial system. As far as I'm concerned, letting a murderer off is tantamount to being an accessory to the act—or anything that follows."

I nodded. "You mean Benninger's death?"

He corrected me. "Bellinger. Edward Slocum Bellinger."

Something clicked in my mind. "You remember his middle name?"

"Of course," Jepson said. "I have a good memory for names."

I studied Jepson and then smiled thinly. "Let me paint a portrait of our murderer. First of all, he is a perfectionist. He is also extremely brilliant. He must be perfect in everything he undertakes. He cannot endure defeat—even one defeat. And what is more, he believes fiercely in justice. The guilty must be punished. And if this can't be done legally, it must be done extra-legally."

Jepson cocked his head. "Brilliant, you say?"

"Of course. A twisted brilliant mind. He feels that if the guilty are not punished, it is a failure on his part and he must make amends. Now, sir, where were you on the night of—"

Ralph sat up quickly. "How did you like Hong Kong, Orville?"

Jepson brightened. "It was great. We all had a swell time."

Ralph turned to me. "Henry, you *do* remember that Orville took a vacation trip to the Orient with his wife and family. Hong Kong, Honolulu, Manila. The works. And they were gone *all* of April."

By George, he was right.

Jepson nodded. "We didn't get back until the beginning of May. Just in time for the funeral."

"Funeral?" I said. "What funeral?"

"Judge Remsford's funeral. He presided at the Winkler trial. Took the hung jury rather hard too, as I remember. His face got quite livid and he had a few choice words for the jury before he dismissed it." Jepson sighed. "The judge was a fine man. Cut down in the prime of his life, you might say."

"Cut down?"

"Yes. Terminal disease. Began acting a bit erratic. His wife fi-

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nally took him to a doctor. X-rays showed that it was inoperable. Died on the first or second of May." Jepson reflected on the death. "Yes, a fine man. Wilbur Cross Remsford."

Wilbur *Cross* Remsford?

"Left a wife and three children," Jepson said. He patted Ralph on the shoulder. "Well, keep at it. Let me know if you come up with anything new."

Ralph and I were silent after he left.

Finally Ralph cleared his throat. "Henry, I have the feeling that if we looked in Remsford's garage or basement we'd find a certain coil of rope."

I agreed.

Neither one of us made a move to rise.

"On the other hand," I said, "what would be the point of it all? Remsford is dead. He can't be punished. The only ones to suffer if this came out into the open would be his family."

Ralph and I came to an agreement. The case was officially closed.

Our phone rang and Ralph picked it up. He listened and then turned to me. "She wants to know what's a South African eleven-letter word for a tall acacia on which the giraffe often browses."

That *had* been a difficult one. I smiled. "Kameeldoorn. Literally meaning camel thorn."

Ralph turned back to the phone. "He can't think of the word right now, but he'll have it tonight when he drops in at about seven thirty. By the way, the only thing he drinks is sherry." Ralph hung up.

"Now, Ralph," I said, "why did you tell her I'd be over?"

"Henry," Ralph said, "she didn't go through the jungle of our headquarters switchboard just so that she could find out what some giraffe—" He stopped and smiled. "Henry, we just can't have her calling day and night and disrupting the department. You go over there tonight and give her all the words you've got."

Deirdre had a bottle of sherry waiting when I arrived that evening.

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

JOYCE HARRINGTON

He's like me, Ellie thought, alone and hungry. Alone despite Margo and the other girls, despite Miss Swiss and the Director. The old gray cat, with "his tattered ear, his patchy fur, a scab, a clouded eye" was as close to a friend as Ellie had—not like that hateful fat elephant of a Miss Swiss, with her eyes flashing malice and spite . . .

THE OLD GRAY CAT

by *JOYCE HARRINGTON*

"I should kill her. I should really kill her."

"Yeah, yeah. But how, how?"

"I could find a way. I bet I could."

"Oh, sure."

"You don't think I could? I could put poison in her cocoa."

"What kind of poison?"

"Ah, you know, arsenic. Something like that."

"Sure. You gonna go down to the store, say, 'Gimme a pound of arsenic, something like that.' Nobody's gonna ask what you want to do with it?"

"I could push her down the stairs. She'd die."

"Maybe not. She could break all her bones and still live. She'd say, 'Ellie pushed me down the stairs.' Then what?"

"She lies. Everybody knows she tells lies."

"Somebody would believe her. A thing like that, why would she lie?"

"Everybody knows she hates me. She steals my things. Remember the time I had that box of chocolate-covered cherries and she took a bite out of every one and put them all back in the box? Even you said she was the one."

"Probably she was. But everybody knows you hate her right back."

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"You think I shouldn't kill her? You think I should just let her get away with this?"

"I didn't say that, did I? You want to kill her, go ahead. Only be smart. Don't get caught."

"I don't care if I get caught."

"You'll care. If you have to spend the rest of your life in jail, you'll care all right."

"Is this better than a jail? Listen, if I get caught I'll play crazy. You think I can't play crazy? Watch this."

Ellie crossed her eyes, let her tongue loll out of her mouth, and waggled her head. "Glah-glah-glah," she said.

"Nobody would believe that for a minute. You need some lessons in playing crazy."

"That's funny. You know, you're really funny. Ha, ha. See how I'm laughing? You don't think I'm crazy enough. I suppose you think you're crazier than I am?"

"The whole world is crazy. Just act normal. Then everybody'll think you're crazy."

"Margo, you're my best friend. But you're wrong. Anyway, if I really do kill her, which maybe I won't, but if I do, nobody will know I did it. Not even you."

"Will you tell me?"

"I guess so. Maybe. I could put a deadly snake in her bed. I read that in a book once."

"Where would you get a deadly snake?"

"That's a problem."

A bell rang. The door banged open and Miss Swiss marched into the room.

"Lunchtime, girls," she announced. Her voice was brassy and her hair was the color of tarnished trumpets, stiff and shiny with hair spray. She wore a pink ruffled pinafore over a green nylon dress. The ruffles flapped over her bulging frontage lending a quivering vitality to the corseted flesh beneath.

"Put your games away," she blared. "Books and magazines back on the shelf. Let's keep this room tidy, girls." Her eyes swept the room like twin beacons, flashing malice.

Ellie picked up a fistful of marbles from the Chinese checkerboard that lay on the table between them. She aimed at the back of Miss Swiss's metallic coiffure. Margo grabbed her arm across the table.

"Don't be stupid," she whispered.

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Miss Swiss turned. "Fighting again, girls? Margo, I'm surprised at you. Ellie, you've been warned before. I'll have to report you to the Director. No dessert for either one of you." She smiled widely, showing gold inlays. "It's apple brown Betty today."

"Damn your apple brown Betty!" Ellie shouted, throwing marbles onto the worn wine-colored carpet. "And damn you, you fat elephant!"

"Shut up, you dummy," Margo whispered more urgently.

"Language, Ellie. Shocking," said Miss Swiss with an even more complacent smile. "The Director will be terribly disappointed. Margo, leave the room. Ellie will stay and pick up all those marbles. She will get no lunch at all. She will go to her room and stay there until I tell her she may come out. After lunch there will be a movie. I believe it is a film about Hawaii. Move along, girls."

Margo joined the drift of others toward the door of the recreation room. The smell of over-baked fish and boiled potatoes crept in at the door as the group of 20 or so trickled out. In the doorway Margo turned and mouthed silently at Ellie, "I'll bring you some food later."

Ellie shook her head and blinked back tears. Suddenly she felt hungry. The food was usually tasteless but now that it was being withheld, she felt a gnawing in her stomach that could only be assuaged by large helpings of hot food.

"I'm hungry," she whined.

"You should have thought of that before," snapped Miss Swiss, no longer smiling. "Pick up those marbles."

Ellie hunkered down on her heels, her thin legs disappearing into the folds of her wrinkled cotton skirt. She dropped her head onto her bony knees and folded her arms over both.

"I'm really going to kill you," she muttered into the flower-printed fabric.

"What was that?" demanded Miss Swiss. And, "What did you say?" when she got no answer. "Look at me!"

Ellie said nothing and did not raise her head. She remained folded into an unresponsive mound on the floor.

Miss Swiss reached down and prodded Ellie's shoulder with a sharp forefinger. Her nails were filed into curving talons and were painted a frosted pink.

"Pick. Up. Those. Marbles." said Miss Swiss, forming each word as if it were a stone falling from her lips onto Ellie's head.

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Ellie grunted and toppled over. She lay on the floor, amid the brightly colored marbles, gazing up with hatred at Miss Swiss.

"Where's the cat?" she said.

"What cat?" Miss Swiss stepped back, looking surprised. "You know we don't allow cats in here. Or dogs, for that matter."

"My old gray cat. That's what cat. The one that came to my room." Ellie knew that Miss Swiss was only pretending to be surprised. She knew Miss Swiss was somehow responsible for the non-appearance of the rangy gray tomcat who had the habit of leaping onto Ellie's window sill and wolfing down whatever tidbit she had left for him there, favoring her with a wicked leer and departing with an arrogant flirt of his crooked tail. All summer long the cat had appeared with the first morning light while Ellie lay sleepless, with no reason to get up and no company but her hatred for Miss Swiss.

"If you've had a cat in your room, you've been breaking the rule. I don't know what we're going to do with you, Ellie. You're a very disruptive influence on the other girls. Do you think I like to be always punishing you? Wouldn't you like to be friends?"

"What did you do to him? Did you poison him? Or did you send him to the A.S.P.C.A.? They put cats in gas chambers there. Did you know that? I'd like to put you in a gas chamber."

Ellie felt tears rising again and rolled over to hide her face from Miss Swiss's inquisitory stare. She felt a marble under her hip and concentrated on that small pain to keep the tears in check.

"Ellie, Ellie," said Miss Swiss, her voice wheedling now, placatory. "That's a terrible thing to say. But I won't hold it against you. I won't even report it to the Director. But you've really got to get up now and pick up those marbles. I'll help you. And then later on, when I take my break, you can come and have cocoa in my room and we'll talk about this cat."

Ellie sat up. So, she thought, she does know about the cat. She can't fool me. She's trying to get around me so I won't kill her. Fat chance, the fat slob. Ellie picked up a red marble and then a yellow one. Miss Swiss was on her hands and knees, her green rump in the air, gathering marbles.

"Maybe I can even save you some apple brown Betty," she said.

"With whipped cream," said Ellie. "I like whipped cream."

"We'll see," said Miss Swiss.

Ellie made a rude gesture toward Miss Swiss's backside. . .

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Ellie waited in her room for Miss Swiss's summons. It wasn't much of a room, but as Miss Swiss often reminded her, it was one of the best in the house. It had a window that looked out over the little park across the street. The leaves were falling now from the spindly trees that dotted the shriveled grass, and a gusty wind blew the leaves in erratic spirals between the benches.

Ellie lay on her bed and let her mind drift. Her pillow smelled musty and the smell evoked a memory, not of an event, but of a life lived in a house where a dark closet under a staircase smelled just that way and fetching galoshes on a rainy day was an occasion for terror. But the tall woman with the soft brown hair and the long strong hands was there to dispel morbid fancies with raisin cookies, a song, and the certainty of love.

"Ma. Oh, Ma," Ellie sighed.

Ellie had no memory of the death of her mother; she had been too young. There was only the unbearable absence, the loss of love, the vacancy that could never be filled no matter how hard she tried. And she had tried.

The cat had been her latest attempt. Too well she realized that the cat's attachment to her had been cupboard love. His first visit had coincided with half a tuna sandwich smuggled into her room from the regular Sunday evening cold supper. She had wrapped it in a paper napkin and placed it on the window sill to eat later before she went to bed. But a quarrel over the television set had brought a scolding from Miss Swiss, and Ellie had gone to bed spurting wrathful tears. The tuna sandwich had been forgotten.

A rustling had awakened her to a gray dawn and a gray shape on the window sill. The cat, sensing her movement, had looked up from his feast and hissed a warning at her. Then he had resumed his marauding, ignoring her as the sandwich disappeared and the napkin fell, limp and shredded, from his claws.

From her bed, Ellie had watched the cat's thin sides heave in and out as he chomped voraciously. She'd heard a sound, not quite a purr, yet not a growl, as the cat broadcast his ownership of the food. As the light gradually increased, she saw his tattered ear, his patchy fur, a scab, a clouded eye. He's like me, she thought. Alone and hungry. He left abruptly, not stopping to preen as house cats do after eating.

After that she always left something on the window sill. And always the cat came in the still hour of dawn. After a few visits he permitted Ellie to approach the window, each time a little

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closer until, by mid-summer, he presented his scruffy head to be scratched. Ellie scratched diligently. She fondled his torn ear and passed her fingers gently over the milky eye. The first time she did that, the cat moved swiftly, clamping her hand between sharp yellow teeth.

Ellie was startled, but she didn't flinch. The cat held on for a minute. Two minutes. Ellie stood very still, sweating in her thin nightgown. Then the cat released her hand and nuzzled it with his damp, scarred nose. It was as close as they ever became to each other. The cat would not permit himself to be picked up. Ellie never thought of a name for him. He was just "the old gray cat."

Ellie told no one about the cat. No one but Margo. After her transistor radio disappeared, Ellie had to talk to someone.

"Bet I know who took it," said Margo.

"You think she did? Ooh, I could kill her!"

"She took my Snoopy dog away, didn't she? Said I was too old for baby toys. I bet she has a closet full of stuff she's taken away from people here. She's bad news."

"Well," said Ellie proudly, "I've got something she can't take away from me." And she told Margo about the visits of the cat in the early morning.

"Of course," she added, "he's ugly as sin, and probably dirty and diseased. Nobody would want him but me, and she couldn't keep *him* in any closet. He'd scratch her eyes out." Ellie giggled. "Serve her right," she said.

"Be careful," Margo had warned her. "Don't let her find out. She'll figure out some way to spoil it for you. She's a genius that way."

Ellie had been careful. But somehow Miss Swiss had found out. The cat had been absent for over a week now. Almost ten days. At first she told herself that a tomcat might have gotten into a fight and gone away to heal himself. She waited and watched every morning, wishing he might feel safe enough with her to come and have his injuries tended. Then she thought he might have been hit by a car. She envisioned him lying stiff and bedraggled in a filthy gutter somewhere in the city. But that didn't feel right to her. The cat was too wary, too wise, to be the victim of an accident.

No, she decided, the cat had been intercepted on one of his morning visits. The cat had been on his way to her and had been

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trapped because of his faithfulness. Trapped and killed, and who would have been mean enough, ruthless enough, cruel enough to do such a thing? Only Miss Swiss.

Ellie rummaged in her bureau drawer and failing to find her embroidery scissors remembered she had loaned them to Margo. She crept out of her room and down the hall to Margo's room. Everyone was at the movie. Hawaii! All hula dancers and pineapples and surfing. As if any of them could ever hope to go there.

Margo's room was dark, even in the middle of the day, and it smelled bad. Margo wasn't very clean. And her window looked out on an alley where the garbage cans were kept. She found her scissors lying on the floor where Margo had been cutting up magazine pictures for a decoupage project. The floor was littered with scraps of paper and there were dollops of dried glue on the rug. Ellie hurried back to her own room, the embroidery scissors safe in her pocket.

Back in her room, she cast about for some other weapon against Miss Swiss. The embroidery scissors was sharply pointed, but short-bladed. Miss Swiss was thickly clothed in fat. The short blades might not be equal to the task. But search as she might, there was no other possibility in her room; no pills, potions, or powders. Certainly not a knife, and Ellie had never seen a real gun. She considered wrenching one of the iron railings from the foot of her bedstead, but knew without trying that she lacked the strength. Maybe there would be something lying about Miss Swiss's room, some innocuous object that she could use if the right moment came.

If the moment came. But it probably would not come. Ellie would drink cocoa in Miss Swiss's room and listen to the lecture that would accompany it. She would nod and smile and promise to be good, all the while thinking deadly thoughts at the pink and falsely smiling Miss Swiss. But thoughts, however deadly, couldn't kill. Ellie's hand groped in the folds of her skirt, pressing the hard sharp outline of the small scissors against her thigh.

There was no knock at the door. Miss Swiss never knocked. The doorknob turned and the door opened just wide enough to admit the stiff curls and the painted smirk.

"Come along now, Ellie. The cocoa's ready and that movie's good for another half hour. At least we'll have some privacy for our chat."

"Coming, Miss Swiss."

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With her hand still pressing the scissors against her thigh, Ellie followed the fluttering pink pinafore down the hall. Miss Swiss had, undoubtedly, the best room in the house, if you discounted the Director's office on the second floor which was paneled in glowing rosewood and draped in burgundy velvet. But the Director didn't live on the premises and Miss Swiss did.

Miss Swiss opened the massive door and ushered Ellie into her sanctum.

"Take the rocking chair, Ellie, dear. Pull it right up to the table. I'll pour the cocoa. There's the dessert I saved for you. *And* a bowl of whipped cream. We can have some in our cocoa, too. Although I really shouldn't, should I? Not with my weight problem."

While Miss Swiss babbled on, Ellie glanced round the room appraisingly. There were china animals everywhere. Quaint mice were pursued by cunning cats who were chased in turn by winsome dogs across the top of a bookcase. A pyramid of owls perched wisely in a whatnot by the window. Beasts of prey were restricted to a bureau where lions, leopards, and bears indiscriminately stalked each other across a long lace doily. A barnyard group browsed placidly atop a console television set. Ellie sneered inwardly at Miss Swiss's execrable taste, while envying both her freedom and her privacy to indulge her whims.

"I see you're admiring my menagerie. I've been collecting them for years. I just love animals, don't you?"

"No," said Ellie, and shifted her gaze to the fireplace. More animals paraded across the mantel: elephants, deer, and a particularly ugly version of a camel complete with howdah.

"No? But I thought that was why we're here. Something about a cat. Help yourself to cream, dear."

Ellie did, and spooned dessert in her mouth before answering. "One cat," she said, while taking careful note of the brass andirons and the iron poker that stood beside the firescreen.

"Well? What about this cat? You know we can't allow you girls to keep animals."

"I wasn't keeping him. Nobody could keep him. He came to visit. He was my friend, and now you've gone and done something to him." Ellie continued spooning up cream and chunks of apple.

Miss Swiss sipped cocoa and licked chocolate foam from her plump pink lips. "But I never saw this cat, Ellie, dear. If I had, I could not have allowed you to continue having him in your room. I would have spoken to you about it. Fair is fair."

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"Fair is fair," mocked Ellie. "You killed him, didn't you?" She finished her dessert and stuck her finger into the remaining cream in the bowl.

"Ellie," chided Miss Swiss, "don't eat with your fingers. Use a spoon. I most certainly did not kill your cat. I love animals. I understand how you feel. Suppose I give you one of these?"

She set down her cocoa mug and walked across to the bookcase.

"Now, which one shall it be? A Siamese? Or would you like to have this dear little fluffy white kitten? I can't give you the tabby. She's my absolute out-and-out favorite, given to me by a girl who left us seven years ago. But any of the others. You may take your pick."

While Miss Swiss stood fondling each china cat in turn, Ellie took a final swipe at the bowl of cream and noiselessly left the rocking chair. She felt that the moment had come. If she didn't do it now, she never would. And after all her talk to Margo, she felt obliged to carry out her intentions. She sidled closer to the fireplace. And closer.

Miss Swiss continued to hover lovingly over the glossy representations of cat antics. "Now here's a cutie. I call him my Manx cat because his tail broke off, but he looks so lifelike playing with his tiny ball of yarn."

Ellie picked up the poker. It dragged at her arm and she wondered if she would have the strength to raise it. Her heart pounded and her head felt as if it would float off her shoulders with excitement. She felt an odd drawing together in her stomach almost as though all her vital organs were gathering themselves for one enormous effort. With both hands she raised the poker over her head. Her feet started traveling across the braided rug.

Miss Swiss looked over her shoulder and screamed. The poker flew from Ellie's hands. Miss Swiss stepped to one side, quickly for a woman of her size and weight. The ruffles on her pinafore fluttered wildly and her normally pink face turned the color of used chewing gum. The poker smashed into the bookcase and devastated the prim line of smirking cats.

Ellie's hand fumbled in the folds of her skirt, but before she could find her pocket her knees buckled and she fell to the floor with a thump. She fought for breath and fought the pain that scuttled like a trapped animal through her body. She gritted her teeth and closed her eyes. Her hand found its way into her pocket and she clutched the cold steel scissors.

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"My cat," she gasped. "I'll kill you for that."

And she died. Ellie died.

Miss Swiss had seen death before. She recognized its awful presence on Ellie's face, bluish now and set forever in a snarl. But never had she come so close to death herself. If she hadn't moved quickly, she might have been lying on the rug beside Ellie with her head smashed in. Shakily she tiptoed around the pitiful corpse and opened the heavy door.

In the hall wondering eyes stared at her.

"We heard a noise," said Margo. "Anyway, the movie's over. It wasn't any good."

"Ellie has suffered a collapse," said Miss Swiss in answer to their unspoken question. "I shall have to call the doctor and the Director. And that son of hers."

"Is she dead?" asked Margo.

"She is," said Miss Swiss softly, and then resuming her trumpet-like tone, "Go to your rooms, girls. This is no time to be wandering about."

Gray and white heads nodded and carpet-slippered feet shuffled away. There were a few disheartened whispers, but for the most part there was silence as each old woman reflected on the nearness of her own inescapable end.

Only Margo remained.

"Miss Swiss," she said. "May I have Ellie's room? I know this may not be the right time to ask, but it is a much nicer room than mine, and if I wait someone else might get it. So may I, please?"

"Yes, yes," said Miss Swiss. "Margo, you were her friend. Do you know why. . . ? No, never mind. Go along now."

Margo lurched down the hall, scarcely needing to lean on the cane that was never out of her hand these days. In her room she began hauling things out of her bureau drawers and piling them on her bed in preparation for moving into Ellie's room: flannel nightgowns, warm winter underwear, a transistor radio. Too bad about Ellie, she thought, but if she hadn't died she would have got herself tossed out one of these days.

When she came to the closet, she paused. The smell was getting rather bad. She groped on the floor of the closet and came up with a plastic bag. The bag sagged heavily and Margo handled it gingerly, holding it away from her body with stiff fingertips.

It had been so easy to lure the cat onto her own window sill. All

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it took was a morsel of greasy hamburger. So easy to pretend insomnia and get a sleeping capsule from Miss Swiss. One capsule taken apart and its contents mixed with the meat. The cat, disarmed by Ellie's kindness, had allowed Margo to come close. One swift blow with her cane, and then pop into the plastic bag. Margo never knew whether the cat had died from the capsule or from a crushed skull. Or whether he had suffocated inside the plastic bag. Maybe all three.

But now she had no further use for him. Ellie was dead, too. If Ellie hadn't died this afternoon, or at least provoked Miss Swiss into having her removed, Margo had one final scheme in mind. Early tomorrow morning she would have placed the dead cat on Ellie's window sill. That would surely have done the trick. Ellie would have gone on a rampage and they would have had to get rid of her. But none of that was necessary now.

Margo carried the reeking plastic bag to the open window and dropped it into a lidless garbage can below. Then she cheerfully set about removing her clothes from the closet.

It had been worth it. The best room in the house was now hers. Next to Miss Swiss's, of course.

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a *NEW* crime story by

DAVID ELY

Noel Foy, the infallible London art expert, was "the image of correctness and respectability, a man to whom honor and tradition were sacred"—until he received an offer he couldn't refuse . . . a scholarly story of conspiracy and clandestine looting, of high stakes and equally high risks . . .

THE LOOTING OF THE TOMB

by *DAVID ELY*

Beneath the soil of central Italy, between the Tyrrhenian Sea and the Apennine Mountains, there lies a treasure so vast that although it has been despoiled for centuries, what remains profitably supports what is probably the most scholarly criminal operation in the world.

It was in this region that the ancient kingdom of Etruria flourished from the seventh to the third century B.C., until conquered by Rome. Where the Etruscans originated is the subject of controversy among historians; the language of Etruria, too, has yielded little of its mystery. No such doubts attach to the enormous historic and artistic value of the gold, the bronzes, and the decorated vases and statues which were placed within the tombs—tombs by the hundreds, by the thousands, whole subterranean cities of the dead, locked in the hills between Rome and Florence.

The looting of Etruscan tombs has long been financed by museums and private collectors throughout the world. If these patrons do not commission the robberies outright, they at least take pains not to inquire closely into the provenance of the objects offered to them for purchase. To serve this market a specialized system of plunder has evolved, its functions divided among the grave robbers, the antiquaries, and other agents who

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act as intermediaries, and the various experts in smuggling and bribery. The buyers themselves are sometimes forced to digest mistakes, for the production of fake Etruscan pieces has prospered as a sideline to the theft of genuine ones.

The Italian Government cannot provide adequate protection for its Etruscan heritage. There are too many tombs, too widely scattered. Many have yet to be discovered—how many, no one knows. In recent years hundreds of hitherto unknown tombs have been identified by the use of aerial photography and the proton magnetometer, but this has simply enlarged the already impossible security problem. New archeological devices have not improved matters, either, for technology serves the grave robber who digs by night as well as the professor who digs by day. The hunt has merely become more intense, better financed, more tightly organized—and riskier.

It was on such a clandestine mission that a 45-year-old London art expert named Noel Foy entered the former kingdom of Etruria on a cloudy morning in the spring of last year. Among his colleagues Foy was unrivaled for his keen eye and penetrating judgment. He had an unerring instinct for fakes, and could date pieces with pinpoint accuracy. Museum curators relied on him absolutely. None of his opinions had ever been challenged with success—and now no other expert dared go up against him. In the field of Italic and Etruscan studies Noel Foy's word was law.

He was tall and thin, with a narrow face and a bony jaw, and regarded the world with analytic severity through a forbidding pair of horn-rimmed glasses. In all particulars he was the image of correctness and respectability, a man to whom honor and tradition were sacred . . . and it was precisely for these reasons that he was about to perform a criminal act.

Foy was the second son of a provincial baron ruined by war, taxes, stupidity, and bad luck. For years Foy had lived like a pauper, devoting most of his earnings to maintain the family estate in Hampshire, a sixteenth-century mansion to which he felt a profound attachment. But his sacrifices had not been enough. Unless he came up with a substantial amount of money in a hurry, the place would be sold for debts.

Thus he had accepted a proposal he would otherwise have spurned out of hand—to put his expertise at the service of a dealer in antiquities whose reputation was as clouded as his sources and clients were obscure. All Foy had to do was to see a

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particular man in a particular place, and authenticate certain pieces; but he knew very well what all this meant, and he could solace himself only with the reflection that he would spend not a penny of the money on himself.

As Foy drove north along the Via Aurelia in the black Fiat 127 he had rented in Rome, he became increasingly nervous. Only after he had pocketed half of his fee had he been informed by the dealer that the client was not satisfied to let his purchase rest on Foy's judgment alone, but that authenticity was to be doubly guaranteed in a way that had chilled Foy to the marrow—the breaching of a virgin tomb.

On a number of past occasions Foy had been present at the opening of a tomb which had survived the centuries intact. It had always been an exciting event—and it would be exciting this time too, he knew, but in a quite different way, for he would be creeping about the countryside at night in the company of professional criminals on an enterprise which, if discovered, would bring jail, disgrace, total ruin.

Just before noon he reached the turnoff for the small city of Tarquinia, whose Etruscan museum and world-famous tombs he had visited often. He did not stop there this time; he was too well-known. He put on a pair of dark glasses and drove straight through the town. Five miles east, as expected, he saw a dusty old Renault waiting at the side of the road, with a man in a leather cap behind the wheel.

Foy slowed and stopped, and honked three times. The man in the leather cap gave him a salute and started his car. Foy drove behind him along back-country roads to his destination, a humble farmhouse several miles northeast, where he was to meet a man called Rossi, a name so common in Italy as to be not only meaningless but, under the circumstances, in all likelihood false.

Foy's host was waiting in the doorway, smoking a cigarette. He was a sturdy man with a large but well-shaped nose, and iron-gray hair which he wore cropped short. Foy, approaching, had the impression he had met him before, but couldn't remember where or when. "Welcome to Etruria," the grave robber said, shaking Foy's hand. His manner was steady and confident, but before he stood aside to let his guest enter the house, he swept the road and the surrounding fields with a sharp gaze from his dark and luminous eyes.

"There's been a little trouble, Mr. Foy," said the man known as

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Rossi, as he and Foy sat in a pair of wooden chairs before the fireplace, where a fire had been laid but not lighted. "Some damned amateur stole a vase out of the museum at Vulci last week. Did you hear about that? . . . No? Well, one of the Rome newspapers made a lot of noise about it, so the Ministry decided to put on a show of force. They've sent in some extra police to cover the area, which unfortunately includes our part down here."

Foy cleared his throat anxiously. The Italian revenue police were justly feared by smugglers and art thieves and other members of the criminal world he was about to enter. "Well, perhaps we had better postpone—"

"No, no. You've come a long way for this, Mr. Foy, and then I have my own schedule to maintain. I have other clients, you know. We simply need to be particularly careful now."

A scraping sound overhead made Foy glance up.

"I have a man on the roof," Rossi told him. "A lookout, you understand."

This information, far from reassuring Foy, made him all the more aware of the danger. He envisioned a battalion of police rushing the farmhouse from all sides.

"The worst thing," Rossi continued, "is that they've increased the payoff to informers. Of course a man won't want to get his neighbor in trouble, but temptation can be resisted just so far. And you know how it is in a small community like Tarquinia. It doesn't take much to stir people's curiosity. I know you took precautions, but still—a foreign-looking gentleman wearing dark glasses, driving through town in a car with Rome license plates—who knows? Even the most trivial things get talked about, and in time someone in the police may hear about it and start wondering." He gave Foy a searching look. "That's what the police do, Mr. Foy—they hear things and wonder about them."

"And the police, do they know—well, what you do?"

"I've never been arrested, Mr. Foy—but, yes, the police are well aware of my occupation, and if they should see me in the company of a scholar of your reputation, they would hardly need to strain their imaginations to realize what was being planned. We will need to be discreet, to get to work without delay." Rossi reached into his coat pocket and took out an envelope. "The photographs, Mr. Foy. You'll want to see these, I imagine."

A professional grave robber, Foy knew, could locate a tomb in a variety of ways. He might bribe his way to restricted government

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files, or find the prize himself, using geological survey equipment, such as a potentiometer. Then he would bore a small hole, perhaps four inches in diameter, into the earth and through the ceiling of the tomb, which consisted of tufa, the porous rock of the zone, and which was relatively easy to cut. A special camera with a flash attachment, lowered through the hole, would permit photographs to be taken of the interior of the chamber.

From these photographs an experienced thief could make a rough estimate of the value of the tomb's contents. This estimate, with a description of the articles, would be transmitted through the clandestine art world until a purchaser was found. The buyer or his intermediary would then send an expert to examine the pieces, authenticate them, and come to an agreement on the price. In this case a price range had already been established, and it was Foy's understanding that if his estimate fell within these limits, both parties would accept his valuation.

He opened the envelope. His opinion would be based on a study of the pieces themselves, but he was eager to see the photographs, which Rossi had, understandably, kept in his own hands.

Foy saw that everything appeared to be more or less as described. The sarcophagus was of stone, its lid undecorated; this, and the unimaginative copying of Greek designs in the decorative paintings on the walls, indicated that the period was of the fourth century B.C. It was the vases that were of the utmost importance—not Etruscan vases, but Greek ones, imported by the ancient Tarquinians either from Greece itself or from the Greek colonies in southern Italy. Several were clearly of considerable value, one of them a splendid krater in red and black, with a temple scene brilliantly depicted on its sides.

And yet something seemed not quite right to him. He went over the photographs once more. Yes, the lid of the sarcophagus was cracked across, and did not appear to sit properly in place.

Foy looked up at Rossi. "This isn't a virgin tomb," he said. "It's been opened before."

Rossi seemed neither surprised nor dismayed. "You noticed that too, I see. No, there aren't many virgin tombs left, Mr. Foy. We won't find any gold or silver in this one. It's been looted already." He smiled. "A good one thousand years ago, I'd say—maybe double that. They didn't bother with vases then. If the tomb had been opened within the past few hundred years, it would be empty, vases and all."

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"Yes, that's true."

Rossi rose to his feet. "You'll see it yourself tonight, but I imagine you'll want to take a look at the site now, while the light is still good."

Noel Foy's chief responsibility was to examine the vases in Italy, and then again after they had been smuggled to London, to be certain they were the same ones; but he also had to see that the site itself had not been tampered with. This he needed to do by daylight, and he felt most conspicuous stalking across the fields beside Rossi, with the man in the leather cap behind them.

"Wait," Foy said, stopping. "Suppose we run across the police? You yourself said we shouldn't be seen together."

Rossi laughed. "You're right. I'd forgotten." He gave Foy an amused glance. "You're a born conspirator, Mr. Foy." He turned to the man in the leather cap. "Gigi, you guide the gentleman the rest of the way. I'll go back to the house and wait for you."

The site was almost a mile from the farmhouse—due north, as Foy ascertained from the little compass he had brought. Once there, he counted off his paces to the nearest landmark—a tree—which he notched with his pocketknife. This would keep him from being tricked, if Rossi had the intention of leading him through the darkness to a quite different location, one that had been prepared in advance.

The site was on a grassy slope beyond the tilled fields. It bore no distinguishing marks, and in fact Foy would not have noticed it if Gigi hadn't stopped him, looked around to take his bearings, and then directed him to it. Foy studied the terrain carefully. Yes, there was the hole through which the camera had been lowered, covered now with a plug of grass-tufted earth. The rest of the ground was solid underfoot. The grass and scattering of wild flowers showed no signs of having been disturbed.

Foy was not, however, content with a superficial examination. He had to be sure. For half an hour he paced slowly about the area, stooping from time to time to study the grass and soil with his trained eye. Finally he signaled to Gigi and they returned to the farmhouse.

As darkness fell, they gathered before the fireplace, waiting for the hours to pass. Gigi brought out bread and salami and wine, but Foy had no appetite. Suppose something went wrong? The police might have been tipped off. They could be lying in wait at the tomb. He stirred uneasily in his chair.

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His future was in the hands of this man Rossi, about whom he knew only the name—and the name was undoubtedly false. He supposed he had conventional ideas about criminals, but nothing about Rossi suggested the robber, except, perhaps, his dedicated professionalism. Rossi was at the top of his dangerous trade. No doubt that accounted for his air of discipline and authority. The stakes were high, the risks enormous. Professional gamblers were said to display the same qualities. And yet Foy could not quiet his fears, or rid himself of the sensation that there was something of vital importance he should know, but did not.

Rossi stirred the fire with a stick, then pushed his chair back. "We won't have long to wait now," he remarked, turning to his guest. "You seem a little worried, Mr. Foy."

"I've never done anything like this before," Foy replied defensively, "but I suppose you're accustomed to it."

Rossi smiled, but there was a hardness in his face that Foy hadn't seen before. "Yes, I'm used to it. I grew up in it, Mr. Foy, as my father did before me, and his father before him."

"A family business, then."

"A business needs a market, Mr. Foy. If there were no market, there would be no business." Rossi stood, and lighted a cigarette. "In any event, what harm does it do for beautiful things to be displayed in the world's museums?"

"They might just as well be displayed in Italian museums."

Rossi flashed him a curious glance. "Yes, that's true, but Italian museums don't have space for it all. They can't even care properly for what they've got, Mr. Foy."

"I'm hardly in a position to moralize," Foy said drily, "but the lack of museum space in Italy doesn't seem to be a satisfactory justification."

"No? Perhaps not. But tradition does have some weight, Mr. Foy. Foreigners have been sacking Italy for centuries—and other foreigners have built their careers on the plunder."

He straightened to his full height, and stood staring impassively down at Foy. "You say this will be your first experience, Mr. Foy. But what you are setting out to do tonight, is it really much different from what you've been doing before? Handling stolen goods? Appraising the proceeds of robberies? Don't the scholars know where all the things come from that fill their museums? Does it make any difference if a piece was stolen last week or a thousand years ago?"

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Rossi turned away to face the fire. "Centuries of robbery," he said, his voice low and bitter. "Not just the tombs. No, they've been robbing us of everything that can be dug up or pulled down or torn apart and carried off. We've been pillaged so often and in so many different ways and by so many hands that it's incredible we still have anything left worth stealing."

He swung around in a sharp about-face. "I'll tell you a little story, Mr. Foy. Very amusing. There's a man I know from Tarquinia. We grew up together. Well, he couldn't find work here, so he went to Milan, but there weren't any jobs there, either, and so he became one of the millions of Italians forced to emigrate to earn a living—a man in exile, among foreigners, and despised by them. And what do you think he's doing? He's a museum guard. He works at a great museum in Germany. And do you know what he's responsible for protecting?" Rossi gave a short savage laugh. "The Etruscan collection, Mr. Foy. Yes, the Etruscan collection—every piece of which was stolen out of the ground he walked on, his native ground, his *terra*, his home!"

Foy was so disconcerted by Rossi's outburst that he rose involuntarily to his feet.

"These things should remain here," Rossi said harshly. "They should be held in our museums. If foreigners want to look, let them come here, let them buy their admission tickets—and let them be watched carefully while they do it. The Etruscan treasures belong to us!"

"Look here," Foy said, shaken and confused. "What you're saying—I had no idea you—" Was this a joke? A trick of some sort? He paused uncertainly. It didn't seem to be a joke. The lines of anger were cut deeply in Rossi's face—and, looking at the man, Foy was struck more forcefully by the feeling that he had met him before, not just once, but many times. But where? When? "If that's the way you feel, Mr. Rossi," he said, "then I for my part—"

Rossi's manner changed abruptly. He smiled and shrugged. "You must pardon me," he said lightly, turning away. "Sometimes I forget myself. Everything I said is true enough—but a man must live, after all."

"It isn't too late," Foy said in agitation. "We can call it off. We can stop now."

Rossi studied him briefly. "But we have our obligations, Mr. Foy." His face was grave, but there seemed to be a hint of irony in his eyes. "You have yours—and I have mine."

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There was a rapping at the door that made Foy start in alarm. Rossi was unconcerned. "That will be Bernardo," he remarked, going to the door. "Get ready, please, Mr. Foy. It's time to go now."

Bernardo was a thickset young man who had assembled the digging equipment at the site. He reported to Rossi in a voice too low for Foy to hear. Rossi nodded several times. Then he put on his jacket, handed Foy an old coat to wear to protect his suit, and picked up a bundle of lined and padded sacks, in which the tomb's valuables would be packed and carried back.

He and Bernardo led the way, with Foy and Gigi following. The night was cloudy and dark. Foy, his compass in hand, tripped several times, and would have fallen if Gigi hadn't caught him by the elbow. His fear had come back in full force. Every bush he brushed past he expected to be transformed into a uniformed police agent. At each step he waited for the blaze of electric torches, the shouted commands to halt. Only at the last moment did he remember the tree he had notched. He stumbled around until he found it; then he counted off the steps and arrived at the grassy slope, where the three other men were kneeling, silently sorting out the tools.

The work went swiftly. The turf was sliced in even strips and laid aside so that it could be replaced smoothly. The earth beneath was deposited on canvas, to avoid leaving traces later. Foy stood shivering and perspiring on the slope, staring this way and that into the darkness, hearing nothing but the labored breathing of the men digging nearby.

Rossi touched his elbow, summoning him. Foy was surprised. Had they reached the tomb so quickly? He crawled through the hole and found he could stand upright inside. Bernardo was there with a flashlight. Foy realized that the men had cut into the ancient passageway that descended to the tomb. The entry to the tomb itself was farther below. He saw that it was blocked by broken slabs of stone.

"Our predecessors," Rossi said softly. Foy nodded. The ancient robbers would have closed the tomb in that crude way before departing, as an act of atonement to the dead.

Foy held the flashlight while Bernardo and Rossi worked at the entry. Gigi was outside, on guard. The air was stale and dank. Foy found it hard to hold the light steady. He was panting, as if he too were wrestling aside the slabs of stone. When the entry

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had been cleared, Foy moved forward. It had been agreed that he would enter first—another condition set by the cautious purchaser. "Hurry, Mr. Foy," said Rossi. "We have no time to spare."

Foy stepped into the tomb, flashing the beam against the ceiling and the walls. Then he began his examination of the vases, just enough so that he could identify them again later. As he finished with each one, he passed it to Rossi, who handed it through the aperture to Bernardo to be packed in the padded sacks. Foy was sweating heavily. His hands were trembling. He felt a sense of shame and dread, and a powerful desire to break free into the open air outside.

There were whispers behind him. Then he heard Rossi speak to him with urgent authority, "Our time is up, Mr. Foy. We must leave at once!"

Foy pushed his way out of the tomb and up to the tunnel, and scrambled through to the outside. Rossi thrust several sacks into his hands. "Hurry," he said. He led the way back, Foy behind him. Gigi and Bernardo remained to fill in the hole and replace the turf.

Foy trotted along glaring about, expecting to see the lights of the police advancing across the fields or through the woods. He saw no lights, but this only made him fear that they would be lying in ambush up ahead, or within the farmhouse itself, and even after he and Rossi entered the place, and found it empty, he was convinced that the police were out in back somewhere, waiting for the proper moment to burst in on them.

Rossi went back to the kitchen and moved the stove aside, revealing a trap door. He raised the lid, went down a ladder, turned on a lamp below, then returned to the ladder to take the sacks Foy handed down to him.

At Rossi's signal Foy descended into the windowless room. Rossi was setting the vases on the table beneath the powerful lamp.

"Here they are, Mr. Foy," he said. "I hope you won't need much time for your examination. We may have visitors. One never knows."

"And if we do?"

Rossi went over to the wall, bent low, fumbling near the bottom, then stepped back. Part of the wall swung out to disclose a large compartment, where what had been taken from the tomb could be hidden until arrangements were made to smuggle it abroad.

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The compartment was empty, Foy saw, except for a jacket and a pair of trousers neatly arranged on a hanger, with a cap on a hook above.

He looked at it more closely. It was a uniform. An officer's uniform. The uniform of a *guardia di finanza.*

He swayed in his shock and surprise and had to lean against the table for support. "I see," he said, his voice shaking. "This—this explains certain things, Mr. Rossi." He gave a choked laugh. "But why didn't you arrest me at the tomb? Wouldn't that have been simpler?"

Rossi squinted at him. "Arrest you? What the devil do you mean? Why would I—? Ah, the uniform!" He burst out laughing. "Sorry, Mr. Foy. I'm afraid I've given you a shock. No, I'm not a policeman. The uniform is something I keep on hand in case of emergency. One never knows. It might be useful."

Foy stared at him for a few moments, and then, still flushed and trembling, sat behind the table.

"But there may be real *guardie* out searching tonight," Rossi added. "If we don't finish soon, the question of arrest may become less amusing."

"Of course." Foy wiped his brow and swallowed, and began his study of the vases. He worked quickly but with thoroughness, jotting down notes from time to time. Rossi paced quietly about the room, smoking. As Foy finished each vase, he would set it aside for Rossi to carry into the compartment.

"Well?" said Rossi when the examination was over.

"The vases meet your description," Foy said slowly, "in almost every particular."

"And the price?"

Foy frowned down at his notebook, thinking of the tombs and of the graceful and beautiful things that had been placed within them to accompany the dead throughout eternity. He thought too of those who betrayed, who profaned, who robbed—the wealthy robbers with their collections, the sanctimonious robbers who directed the museums, and the scholarly robbers—yes, he was one—who made their reputations on what had been stolen. Rossi had been right. His professional life was founded on theft . . . and was there no way to make amends?

"Well, Mr. Foy? I'm afraid we haven't much time."

"The price, yes," Foy muttered, glancing up. He had to make his decision quickly. He studied Rossi's face intently—those dark

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shining eyes, that resolute jaw, the strongly projecting nose . . . and then, in that instant, he remembered where he had seen the man before.

He took a long breath. There was only one thing to do. "I think the middle of the agreed price range would be fair, Mr. Rossi. That is what I intend to recommend in London."

Rossi nodded. "That will be acceptable, of course."

Foy smiled as they shook hands. Right—it was acceptable. He had no reason to be ashamed of what he was doing. Not now. Not since he had realized who Rossi really was.

On his flight back to England, Noel Foy turned his thoughts to the next and last step in his criminal adventure.

Once the vases arrived, he would be summoned by the London antiquary to give them his final examination, perhaps in the presence of the buyer. This would be little more than a formality. His authentication would be final. No one would question it, and besides, the pieces had been taken from a tomb which, if not technically sealed, had been opened and looted many centuries past.

But he knew it must have been opened a second time—perhaps six months ago, a year or two at most, long enough for time and the turning seasons to smooth away all signs outside, settling the soil and restoring the weave of grass.

The vases were splendid, unbelievably good. No other expert would have known. Even he had almost been fooled.

All fakes. Everything except . . . Rossi's face. Yes, he thought, that was authentic. He would stake his reputation on it. He had seen its like many times before in the great collections—the Vatican Museum, and the Villa Giulia, and in the museum in Tarquinia too—this time not in bronze or terracotta or marble, but in flesh and blood: Rossi himself with his Etruscan face, Rossi the descendant of the ancient Tarquinians, avenging the wrongs of centuries, robbing the robbers.

"Q"

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EDITORIAL COMMENT: *Is this a story of pure mystery? Or is it a riddle story?—with a logical explanation. After all, we now live in a highly technological world . . . Further editorial comment at the end of the story . . .*

NO VISIBLE MEANS

by S. S. RAFFERTY

The day I passed the Real Estate License exam, I envisioned myself as the next land czar of New York. After a year of unemployment, preceded by a string of nowhere jobs, I finally felt I had a foothold in the economy. I wasn't foolish enough to expect my first million in six months, but I did feel that Goldman & Ryan Realty could have used me more effectively.

Joining G&R was less risky than going out on my own. They had a ten-man office, built-in contacts, and *bona fide* leads. But somehow I got shunted into administrative tasks and the horizon for big commissions got dimmer. Then I met Mr. Zeller.

G&R had spent over a year putting together a development deal in the East 70s. It was an intricate operation involving more than 30 parcels in one solid block. The plan called for the purchase and demolition of all the old buildings—tenements, lofts, and storefronts—and the erection of the second largest apartment complex in the city. It was a multi-million-dollar deal, and Mr. Zeller was holding up the whole thing.

Zeller was a tenant in one of the last buildings acquired for the project. Where other tenants had accepted re-location allotments and moved out, Zeller steadfastly refused. And, from the strength of his charter lease and the current climate at the City Housing Board, it looked as if he could delay us interminably. That's when T. J. Ryan decided to buy him off and gave me the job.

"Keep it as low as you can, but go to $10,000 if you have to. Just get him out of there," my boss told me.

I looked on the assignment as the key to my future at G&R. If I could talk this Zeller into moving, I would be one of the favored employees.

The wrecking ball of a crane was bowling over a building at the

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corner of the block when I arrived. All the structures along the street were deserted, their windows and doors covered with gray sheet metal like dead eyes and mute mouths.

Zeller clung to life on the third floor of a five-story walkup. The cold-water flat was shabby, but neat, like its owner. He must have been around 60, but his senses seemed duller than that. His demeanor was tacit ennui, such as you find in a fat cat in a mouseless house.

Zeller was friendly enough and offered me a cup of coffee, which I accepted.

"So you've come about this moving stuff. You can forget it," he said.

"Well, Mr. Zeller, I'm not here so much about moving as I am about your future. We can make it worth your while to re-locate."

"Not on your life. I have to stay here."

"Now, that's what has me confused, Mr. Zeller, really confused. What do you have to gain by remaining here? Eventually my boss will get some judge to toss you out. I don't think you can afford to stay."

"It's worth $179.98 a week to me to stay here, and that's why I'm staying."

That threw me. I had done my homework on Mr. Zeller. He was unmarried, had no visible means of support, yet his rent had always been paid on time and he seemed to have a sound credit rating.

"How is it worth $179.98 a week to you just to live here?"

He gave me a tired look as if to challenge my capacity to comprehend, and then he told me. And I curse him for it.

Gabriel Zeller came to New York 21 years ago from Upper Darby, Pa. He was an only child, and when his parents passed away, he could see no reason to stay in a small town that offered him no future.

Once in New York, Zeller found that his meager education and limited ability put him in the lowest element of society. He was totally despondent, and even contemplated suicide. And then it happened. He was leaving the building one day when the postman stopped him and asked if he ever intended to pick up his mail. He had never bothered in the four weeks that he had lived there to check his mailbox because he had no friends or relatives who would write to him.

Yet there, in his mailbox, were several circulars and four en-

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velopes which contained four checks made out to Gabriel Zeller, representing payment for each week of that month.

And since then the checks had been coming unfailingly every week for nearly 21 years.

"Oh, it wasn't $179.98 at first. I think it was only around $95 in the beginning. But, as prices went up, the amount on the checks increased."

"Didn't you go to the bank and find out who was sending them?"

"Not at first. I was afraid there was a mistake, and I would have to pay it all back. After a year or so, though, I did go. The girl told me they were something called 'cashier's checks.' Now I know, as sure as shooting, if I leave here the checks will stop. Because they did once before.

"I figured I had this good income without working, so I might as well get a better place up the street. I moved in for one day and that Friday I came back here for the mail delivery and there was no check in the mail. I hopped right back into this apartment and have been here ever since and the money has never missed a week. That's why I have to fight to stay here."

I couldn't call him crazy to his face because he was confiding in me, but I was thinking it all the way back to the office.

Try as I could, I was at a loss to explain it. I even made a list of possible answers. Zeller was a remittance man who suffered amnesia? An unknowing heir? But they were cashier's checks, and it defied logic to think that he was being supported all these years in secret.

T. J. Ryan was a bit put out that I had not closed the case on my first try, but I told him it would take a week or two for my plan to work.

That afternoon I stopped off at the Lenox Hill Post Office and made out a change of address form. From then on Gabriel Zeller's mail would be coming to my address in care of my name.

I smiled to myself when I opened my mailbox the next Friday morning, for there was a brown bank envelope. I didn't bother to open it because I didn't want to break the law any more than I had. I had an explanation all worked out in case anything happened: I would say that I was merely protecting the old man's income while he was re-locating.

Zeller looked 20 years older when I called on him Saturday morning. He was discernibly nervous and tired.

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"You know what, Mr. Zeller?" I said to him after he told me about the failure of the check to arrive. "The magic is gone. And do you know why, Mr. Zeller? Because the good spirit who has sent you money all these years knows that you have other income. Here I am about to offer you five, no seven, even eight thousand dollars just to move."

I went on to explain to him the have-and-have-not theory of the gods, and got him to sign the release for the apartment. It was not a challenging task to convince a low-grade mind like Zeller's of such nonsense.

Ryan was pleased with me for holding it down to $8,000, and gave me a small bonus.

I let the checks pile up for four weeks and planned to send them on to Zeller, who had moved into an old folks' home.

When I was putting them in new envelopes, I found myself wondering if Zeller was still at $179.98. As I raised the flap to peek, there, on the face of the check, was my name, not Zeller's.

They come every week. For the first few months I didn't cash any, half out of fear of prosecution, half out of not being able to believe it.

I'm up to $275.38 a week now, and I gave up working for Ryan. The firm wanted me to take over their new Chicago office, but, remembering what had happened to Zeller when he moved, I decided not to risk a change of address. Of course, my apartment building is fairly new, so I don't have to worry about someone knocking it down yet. In fact, I don't have any worries, except that the checks might stop. Then what would I do? *Then what would I do?*

EDITORIAL COMMENT *concluded: Poe once wrote about something he called "the imp of the perverse." Do imps exist elsewhere, everywhere? In World War II, British pilots believed in an invisible imp they named a "gremlin," a mischievous little demon that inexplicably made things go wrong in airplanes. Is there a similar devilkin that inhabits and plays tricks in modern computers?—especially in bank computers? . . .*

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a *NEW* detective story by

R. BRETNOR

It is six years since we last published something by R. Bretnor—too long, too long for his unusual detective stories! In his newest tale we meet The Team (which most people don't know even exists), headed by Colonel Samuel Warhorse, Medicine Chief of the Osage Nation, now serving the government in a highly confidential capacity. The Team tackles "problems that defy ordinary, logical solutions; puzzles that make no sense; perils materializing for no reason out of nowhere; disasters that simply cannot be, but are."

This story will make you think—and if you think hard enough, shudder . . .

THE ACCIDENT EPIDEMIC

by *R. BRETNOR*

Some of us on The Team don't even know that it exists. We're never told about it when we're hired; nor are we ever given the *real* reasons for our hiring. And those of us (like me) who do catch on seldom even discuss it with each other.

On paper, The Team doesn't exist at all. It permeates other agencies; we shuffle filing cards, or act as couriers, or translate documents, or diddle with computers, and each of us has been checked very, *very* carefully where security is concerned, not only by the hush-hush people but by Colonel Samuel Warhorse, who either is or isn't a displaced Army medic, and who once or twice a year goes back to Oklahoma to do his thing as a Medicine Chief of the Osage Nation, and who'd be captain of The Team *if* it existed, just as I'd be his second-in-command.

The best way to describe it is by using the example of water departments and their dowsers. Just about every major-city water department has one or more dowsers on its payroll—but never *as*

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dowsers, because water-witching still isn't quite respectable. They're hired as back-hoe operators, or truck drivers, or whatever, and there they are, ready to do their real job when necessary.

That's how it is with us. Somehow our real jobs filter in to us, always through Chief Sam, and we tackle them and do our best, and afterward everybody forgets all about them, just as people forget about water-department dowsers when they fill their bathtubs.

What sort of jobs? Problems that defy ordinary, logical solutions; puzzles that make no sense; perils materializing for no reason out of nowhere; disasters that simply cannot be, but *are*.

For instance—

Chief Sam called me at 11:30. "We've got another one, Garry," he said. "Smells like a real collector's item. How's about lunch at noon?"

I didn't argue that I already had a date. I canceled it, and half an hour later, when he walked into the chophouse with three other characters, I was waiting for him.

I stood up and he introduced them. Two were State Police Captains, one out from Pennsylvania, the other a tall, rangy, local Western type named Tod Welles; the third, with a French name and nice manners, was an R.C.M.P. Superintendent from up across the border.

"Douglas Garrioch," Sam told them. "He used to be a flyboy. Sometimes he turns out to be pretty useful." He grinned at me, his eyes black-agate under his black Sequoia eyebrows and gray hair, and slapped me on the shoulder with a hand like a bear's paw. We ordered drinks, making small talk till the waiter brought them. Then there was silence. I looked at Sam.

"Our problem for the day," he said, "is simply stated. During the past week the *fatal* one-car accident rate has suddenly gone up—by four thousand eight hundred and some-odd percent."

"Where?" I asked.

"The entire United States and all of Canada. Garry, that means that almost fifty times as many people as usual have been smashing their cars into concrete abutments, plunging them into rivers, rolling them down cliffs—and at top speeds. And at night, *only* at night. Folks are getting spooked. Insurance companies are having fits. The press is getting too damn interested and making noises. So far nobody's released the true statistics, but there's no way to

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keep the local police and sheriffs quiet. It's lucky winter's almost on us, so there's weather to blame it on, but the whole story's sure to break wide-open before too long—and we just can't afford that kind of panic."

"So?" I said, feeling those familiar small cold feet along my back.

"So you go back to work. You dig right in and find what's going on, and just who's killing whom—if there *is* a who. The boys here'll fill you in on everything they know. It's yours from there. Now let's have lunch."

They told me while we ate. They were experts in their field, specialists on highway accidents, and they had all the facts and figures at their fingertips, all the hows and wheres and whens—but nothing else, no *whys*. I asked the obvious questions, trying to find a pattern that would link everything together.

What about the drivers? What kind of people were they? That angle had been pretty thoroughly explored; they were just about every kind. The only thing they seemed to have in common was that most of them had done a lot of freeway driving—the percentage of big-rig truckers was astonishing—but there were too many exceptions to lay down a rule. Otherwise, they were of all ages, sexes, races, driving every kind of car or truck and a few motorcycles. Almost always they had been alone, or just about alone, on the road, with the next vehicle at least a quarter of a mile away; and always, *always* they had been going way over the limit—estimated speed 80, 85, 90, sometimes 100.

How about passengers? Well, there'd been a few—no busloads, no big groups, not even any foursomes.

"Any last words?" I asked. "Did any of 'em drop any kind of hint about why they did it? About what might've hit 'em?" And I was told that no, they hadn't, not really. There'd been a salesman in Ohio somewhere who was still alive when they pulled him out; they thought he screamed out something about hitting a coyote before he coughed up blood and died, but they weren't sure; and anyhow no coyotes had been anywhere around those parts since frontier days. Besides him, there was just a doctor in Saskatchewan, out on the motel circuit with his office nurse; she had lived long enough to whisper something that sounded like ". . . squirrel . . . squirrel . . . "

" 'The birds and the beasts were there,' " quoted Chief Sam. "An odd coincidence."

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"Odd—but hardly pertinent." The R.C.M.P. man shrugged. "People say weird things when they're dying."

And that was that. They had no more to add. Chief Sam and I walked them to the door after he'd paid the check, and he said how I'd keep in touch with them, with Welles especially, and how they'd pass on all reports to me; and I guess somebody had briefed them—they asked no questions about how we'd operate. Then the Chief and I went back into the bar for one more drink and my instructions.

"Hit the road, Garry," he said. "Tonight and every night till you find out something. Stay on the freeways, particularly the Interstates. There've been a few bad ones on back-country roads, but its the freeways where everything's been really happening. Here are your credentials, State *and* Federal." He grinned. "They're sort of hoked up for the occasion, but they're genuine and guaranteed to impress everybody, even us Honest Injuns." He handed me two cards and an enamel-and-gold badge. "They make out you're sort of a cross between Ralph Nader, Oh-Oh-Seven, and the ghost of J. Edgar Hoover. Don't throw their weight around unless you have to."

"Thank you, Heroic Leader," I said, knocking off my drink. "You've put me in the ticket-fixing business. Now I can make my fortune and retire, and take Marina on a trip around the world."

"Any time," said Chief Sam. "*After* you stop those folks getting themselves killed off. Now don't forget to fill your tank—you're going to need it." His grin disappeared. "Take care, Garry, and give that lovely girl of yours my love."

I drove back to the office, and checked out early; and drove slowly up to the apartment, thinking about The Team, and Chief Sam and Marina and myself, and how the strangeness of our natures and our backgrounds and our lives had brought us together to do jobs that needed doing and otherwise would never have been done. Take me, for instance—three of my grandparents were of Scotch descent, by way of Nova Scotia; the fourth was French and English mixed. And there was second sight on both sides of the family.

My great-grandfather Garrioch had seen visions, had known when death would come for friends and relatives there in the cold Western Isles. His son, my grandfather, had it also; but it was different in him, for almost never was it conscious. Usually it simply guided him in simple acts, things done or not done to keep one

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out of danger; he fought four years as an infantryman in World War I, in the Black Watch, and lived to emigrate—very nearly a survival record.

My father inherited it again, and it protected him after he moved down to New England to fish the harsh Atlantic, and in the Navy all through the Second War. In my case, it again had changed. I didn't know I had it until I took my first tour as a chopper pilot in Vietnam. Yes, it protected me—but it also told me, quite consciously and definitely, when death was going to strike—when Charlie was going to slam his rockets or mortar shells into the base, and who on any mission wouldn't make it back.

What do you do with that kind of talent? You don't report yourself to Headquarters. No, you worry about it, and maybe drop a hint to a close friend or two when you feel they ought to hit the sick list, and grieve when they won't take your advice and end up dead. Then, if like me you're very, *very* lucky, maybe you run into someone like Chief Sam Warhorse. He was doing his stuff there at the great base hospital in Saigon, and I was taking a routine physical; and next thing I knew somehow I'd told him everything, and his advice had been simply to accept it, to say nothing, and to keep in touch. We'd be seeing more of one another, he said.

So there I was, driving home to my golden girl, thinking that if it hadn't been for him probably I never would've met her. She had been born in Hawaii, on Maui, her father an Icelander, her mother Japanese, and she was golden-skinned and glowing, and so delicate that she looked almost breakable. She was as sensitive as a Gothic heroine, and as tough as whalebone.

She had to be. *Her* talent had just missed being her tragedy. She is an empath. Even as a child she could feel—in each degree, in every terrible detail—the agony of others. Not physical pain itself, but its tormenting tensions and terrors, the futile thrashings of trapped minds trying to cope with other kinds of pain. It is a talent unhappily too common, and children born with it often become autistic, withdrawing totally into themselves, for in societies that deny and fear the extrasensory, they have no way of learning how to distinguish between exterior agonies and those genuinely their own.

But Marina's parents were wise enough to listen, wise enough not to slap her down. They had no rules to follow, so—instead of calling in the headshrinkers—when she was seven they took her

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to her grandmother in Japan, who had retired to a convent for Zen Buddhist nuns. There she was cared for until she was 14, visited at least twice a year by one or another of her parents, and in constant touch with all her Japanese relations. And there she learned, not how or why her talent came to be, but how she herself, her being, could live with it and maintain tranquility.

When she returned to her father and mother in Hawaii, it had in no way been suppressed, but now she knew how to avoid the dangerous chains of emotional identification, how to say, "This agony's not mine, *it is not me,*" how not to react to it. And yet a visit to a hospital was still, for her, an act of heroism, and she would ask me to detour for miles rather than pass a penitentiary, an insane asylum, or a slaughterhouse. For her talent differs from ordinary telepathy; distance is an important factor in it, and so are numbers. She can handle the impact of suffering individuals well enough, but groups still overwhelm her. She cannot heal; except very rarely, with people whom she loves, she is powerless even to ameliorate. She can only feel.

In the islands she went through high school and then on to college, taking a degree in librarianship—a wise choice, for libraries have more books than people, and books, whatever torments they contain, don't broadcast them. Then she got a job stateside, at a small college library in the state of Washington; and that was where Chief Sam ran into her—by accident, of course, the way he always seems to find his people. He was asking her a question at the reference desk when, without warning, she came out of gear, leaving the conversation dangling. She turned deathly pale; her pupils dilated; she gasped for breath. It took her several minutes to pull herself together, while he watched.

And *then* they heard the sirens. Some self-tortured kid, stoked up on speed and LSD and God knows what, had climbed the campanile tower and tried to fly. She had tuned him in that first dreadful second when he had found that he could not.

Chief Sam coaxed it all out of her and found her a new library job at a nice quiet computer center in Cinnabar, the little Colorado mining town where The Team works—still small enough so that you aren't psychically snowed under as you are in, say, Chicago or New York, but big enough to hold those government sub-agencies we need to keep us going plausibly. He introduced us. I saw her glowing skin, her strange, green-golden eyes, her hair like the fine black lacquer of a household shrine in ancient

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Nara, and instantly I knew the joy and fire of her temperament, and the tempered strength under her gentleness and fragility. We drew together, feeling one another before we had so much as touched our hands; and it was wonderful that neither she nor I, nor Chief Sam even —neither then nor later—had to conceal why we were there, what we were all about.

That made it a whole lot easier, for we needed no barriers of security between us. I could tell her exactly what I was getting myself into, just as she could tell me. So as soon as I got home I phoned her on the job and asked her to take the rest of the afternoon off. I filled her in on the whole deal and told her there'd probably be nights I'd have to spend away from home. She shook her shining head and smiled ruefully. "I guess there's just no limit to the things some men won't do to get out of making love to their poor lonely wives," she said.

We went to dinner early and I told her everything again, somehow hoping that she might, intuitively, think of an angle we had missed. Those drivers, I repeated, driving at top speeds and late at night, must have seen *something*, something startling enough to make them swerve suicidally. The only alternative was to believe spooks were riding with them, or flying-saucer people were suddenly controlling them, or the Russkies or Red Chinese were playing with a new secret weapon. For a few moments she responded with that look people get when they are searching in themselves, but when she spoke it was only to say that she didn't like the freeways.

"I'm not happy on them," she said, looking a little puzzled. "There's—well, there's something *wrong* about them. But it's too vague. I can't get hold of it. It's only strong enough to make me feel uneasy." She took my hand in both of hers. "I know it's silly of me, Garry, with your—your talent. But you *will* be careful, won't you? Promise me?"

It was six days to Thanksgiving. The weather had been nasty for a week, but the night was clear. The highways had dried off, and though yesterday's snow blanketed trees, houses, and hillsides, when I reached I-25 it was all clear going and the traffic was moving ten miles an hour faster than the law allowed, with the big rigs and some other drivers pushing even beyond that.

I got my first signal around ten o'clock, near a side road leading to a little town called Penfield, so I followed my nose down the

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off-ramp and within three miles I came to it—a telescoped VW van, crushed against a cruelly jagged rock-face. There was a wrecker there, and two State Police cars, and a sheriff's deputy, so I pulled off and showed the sergeant my credentials. He was properly impressed and treated me the way I wish people had when I was in the Army.

"Another one of these damn one-car deals," he commented, "and not even on the freeway. The victim is on his way to Penfield in the meat wagon."

I spent twelve minutes with him, and though he kept repeating we wouldn't find a thing, he did help me search the area; and he was right, of course. There wasn't anything.

"I wish to God we could've found it!" he said. "Just once, to take the curse off this crazy business. If you're working on it, I sure wish you luck. Believe me, it's getting to us all!"

That was the first of five that night. The second was just about a duplicate, right off an interchange on 25, only the car looked as if it had been brand-new and probably a Cadillac. The third was a huge diesel truck lying on its crushed cab at the foot of a steep embankment; I got there almost right away, even before the ambulance, and it was a messy deal—messy enough to shake me and the two policemen. The next was standard—a concrete overpass, ripped chunks of what had been a Porsche, a young man's body underneath a blanket. The fifth was something else again—a flaming, smoking heap of unidentifiable wreckage half a straight mile down the mountainside, with the cops and me and the trucker who'd reported it staring helplessly and talking about getting a crew down there come morning.

There were no clues at any of them.

I'd called Marina before midnight from a coffee stop, to tell her where I was and that I loved her; and by three A.M., more than a hundred miles from home, I holed up in a fleabag motel, ate a sandwich, drank half a pint of bourbon, and hit the sack.

I slept till noon—after all, my working hours were going to be from dark to dawn—then made my calls to Chief Sam and Tod Welles, and learned that there was nothing new except a scare story in a national tabloid, which wasn't making anybody happy. I spent the afternoon talking the situation over with State and local police, doing none of us much good, and had dinner with a superannuated sheriff who'd actually forbidden his wife and kids to use the highways after dark.

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That night was like the first, only there were seven of them instead of five; it had rained and snowed a little, and we had bad slick spots here and there. I drove where instinct told me, and again learned nothing.

For the next three days the pattern scarcely varied. I followed 25 clear up into Wyoming and back down again. I followed I-70 for almost 300 miles west of Denver, coping with more bad weather, bedding down at night with my bit of bourbon to dream of Marina—with a nightmare or two about fatal crashes to keep me on my toes. I had nothing to report except somebody's testimony at third hand from the State Police, who'd had it from a sheriff's deputy, who'd had it from a sheepherder driving an old pickup: he'd been following one of them maybe a quarter mile away, and he thought maybe he'd seen some sort of shadow moving right in front of her before she hit.

Then, late on the fourth night, after two A.M., I pulled into a truck stop to get myself together. I'd just come from the nastiest wreck of all—a truck and trailer filled with something flammable. It had gone off at a sharp curve, hit some trees, and flamed instantly. I was there long before the police arrived—in time to hear the driver screaming—and there was absolutely nothing I could do but watch the flames. When it was over, I went into the truck-stop restaurant, ordered a T-bone and coffee to drink while it was cooking, drank half of the coffee, filled the cup up again from a pint I kept against emergencies, and found myself listening to four truckers in the booth behind me. They were fresh off the road and they knew the man whom I'd heard die.

They made the usual profane comments about the one-car crackups, only they said one-rig, and they indulged in the same foolish and futile attempts to explain them, or explain them away. Then, "Okay!" growled one of them. "That was a hell of a way to go, but—ah, hell, man, if it had to happen could you have picked any guy you'd rather have it happen to?"

"Don't talk like that, Slavich," barked another. "Grayber was scum, sure he was, but hell, he was human, wasn't he?"

"Human? Like hell he was human! Remember how that poor damn girl of his always looked like she'd been beat up on? Well, she had. And talk to anybody who's rode with him, or right behind him even. Twice I seen him try to nudge cars off the road when he figured nobody was looking. And he'd run over every critter crossed the road ahead of him—dog, cat, possum, you name

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it. The jerk would speed up to catch 'em. He'd swerve to cut 'em down. Hell, for my money he had it coming!"

They kept on arguing about the dead Grayber for a bit, with nobody getting really mad about it, and then the talk changed to women, and I quit listening. I ate my steak—a good one—but somehow it didn't really grab me. I kept remembering that driver in Ohio who'd screamed about hitting a coyote, and the nurse in Canada who'd died mumbling "... squirrel ... squirrel ..." My mind just wouldn't chase the thought away. When I drove off, I told myself to stop imagining a connection. Sure, there'd been people who'd killed themselves trying to keep from running down a dog, but chances were most had been inexperienced drivers.

There was only one more that night; and next day, when I phoned in, Chief Sam told me to come back for Thanksgiving. Marina and I could have the night together, and then next day, unless we had a date, would we have dinner with his family? I told him we were free as air, we'd love to; and then he told me that he and Tod Welles had been taking Emmie Bostwick to every crash site they could think of. She was part of The Team, a black girl from around Baton Rouge, with a genius for sensing felonious little plans being hatched or carried out anywhere near here—even a day or two afterward. She had a courier's job, a good cover for sudden traveling, and the Chief used her when terrorists or blackmailers were making threats. She was pretty close to being infallible; and she'd detected nothing, absolutely nothing. Chief Sam felt that if there was dirty work afoot it was a long-range deal, and it might even help me to take a two-day break.

So I called Marina and gave her the good news, and in her voice I could read not only pleasure but relief. "Oh, I'm glad, lover! At least I'll have you off those freeways for a while. Last night I had an awful dream—I guess it wasn't really *awful*, but in the dream it was. It scared me, and I've been worried for you ever since. Garry, don't laugh—I dreamed you ran over a poor raccoon."

I didn't laugh, partly because once I had; and coming home I drove more carefully than I usually do.

Thanksgiving Day I took time out in the afternoon to get together with Tod Welles and his R.C.M.P. friend and compare notes. We told each other what we could and ended up just where we'd started, on Line One. Then, at around 4:30, Marina and I drove out to the Warhorses'. Chief Sam has about 20 acres a

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dozen miles out of Cinnabar, near a weird little place called Dudgeon, where there's nothing but a service station, a general store, a bar, a hashhouse, and a combination City Hall and volunteer Fire Department—but only half a mile off the good main road, where you can snake around the mountains without losing too much speed and with about half of it freeway so nobody can really hold you up. It didn't take us long to get there; there wasn't even a whisper of bad weather.

We were greeted by Chief Sam, his wife Connie, three kids, a pretty Warhorse cousin from some university out West, two big brown Labs, a Siamese, and a striped tabby cat. The Warhorses told us it was heap good for stupid palefaces to come in out of the cold and drink firewater with the friendly natives; and we all sat there before the huge fireplace, surrounded by dogs and cats and kids, talking, laughing, and forgetting that along the miles of road that hold our world together people were suddenly smashing to their deaths.

Our conversation flowed from one culture into another; tales were told born in traditions continents apart. Nobody spoiled things by trying to hog the floor; when disagreements showed themselves they became friendly fencing matches instead of duels. Then we went in to dinner, and let the turkey dictate to us.

We left just after midnight, still glowing, and at the door we were kissed good night; and when I shook Chief Sam's hand I knew that he, even as I myself, at once regretted that tomorrow it would be back to work—and yet looked forward to it.

The night was frosty; the air was crystal-clear; never had there been so many stars across the sky. Quickly we left Dudgeon sound asleep behind us and in moments we were at the freeway entrance. I turned into it and speeded up. And as I did, I felt again, suddenly, that something was all set to happen—and the feeling, as it always is, was laced with fear.

"Damn!" I said, only half aloud. "Not tonight!"

Marina heard me. "Garry," she whispered, "are you sure?"

The feeling, oddly, was a little different. I couldn't tell exactly how, but that didn't change it. "Yes, I'm sure," I told her. "I wish to God I wasn't, but I am."

"Can't you—can't we ignore it?"

I shook my head. In the rear-view mirror I could see the single light of a motorcycle coming—coming fast.

That's him, I thought, as he swept by, doing 80 or 85—and yet,

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somehow, I wasn't sure it *was* him. Still, whatever it might be, I knew he was part of it.

"This one may be special," I told her, stepping on the gas. "There's something strange about it. We'll have to see."

She didn't say a word. Her hand moved over and rested lightly on my knee.

For three miles we followed him, taking the mad curves, never letting him get more than a quarter mile away. Then we came to a long, straight, downhill stretch. We passed a sign saying JEFFERS PASS, TURN-OFF 2 MI. There ahead of us was the interchange, a concrete bastion pierced by two sally-ports. Our motorcyclist was heading straight toward it. I could feel apprehension building in me. I could feel the tightening of Marina's hand against my thigh.

The concrete rushed toward the motorcyclist. It rushed at us. It seemed to grow. There was the second sign. There, very suddenly, was the turn-off.

And, so abruptly that for an instant I thought he'd lose control, the motorcyclist hit his brakes and, tires shrieking, swerved sharply to the right, taking the turn-off, barely making it. I forced my eyes back to the road in front of me. I heard Marina scream—

In my headlights, right in the middle of my lane, less than a hundred feet ahead of me, there was a wildcat, white fangs bared, ears back, eyes burning bright—

And he was 25 feet high.

How many impressions can you crowd into a quarter of a second? How many decisions can you make in half of that time? I recall Marina screaming; my hands doing their damnedest to twist the wheel; my brain, in shock, still forcing my foot to floor the throttle instead of trying for the brake. I remember my mind telling me that cars are not as hard as concrete. I don't recall whether or not I closed my eyes.

We hit.

There was no impact, none.

There was a timeless instant in which I felt surrounded by flesh and fur, by the idea of fur and flesh, by an animal odor, musky and far away.

Then we were through, and under the overpass, and nothing lay ahead of us but open road. I looked up in the mirror, and there was nothing there.

Then the reaction hit me. Fearing that in a moment I would be

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trembling uncontrollably, I let my foot leave the throttle. I let compression slow us down. Finally I pulled off onto the shoulder and stopped the car with a jerk.

Beside me, Marina's scream had dropped to a small wailing moan, ululating hysterically. I switched the engine off. Trying to control my almost spastic hands and arms, I reached for her. "Darling, *darling*!" I cried out, shaking her by the shoulders. "It's all right! We're safe! Everything's all right!"

She stared at me out of enormous eyes. Her moaning stopped. "Let me *go*!" she cried out, pulling violently away. Then she covered up her face and wept, her head thrown back, her whole body shaken with her weeping.

"Sweetheart! Marina! It's all *right*!" I kept repeating foolishly. "It was a hologram—some kind of projection. That's *all* it was. I tell you, we're *safe*. There's no need to be afraid!"

She dropped her hands. Still weeping, she threw herself at me. "Afraid! *Afraid!* Of course I'm not afraid! What was there for me to be afraid of?" Her small fists hammered at my shoulder, at my chest. "My G-G-God, are you a log? A stone? *C-can't you feel anything at all?*"

I simply stared at her, helpless before her terrifying intensity.

"My God, *my G-G-God*!" she sobbed, covering her face again. "Those animals! Those poor, *poor* animals! When I think of the c-callousness, the utter emptiness, the—the abandonment, the *uselessness!* Oh, damn you, *damn you!* You'll never *understand!*"

Once more her weeping shook her; and I, shaken by her words, made no attempt to touch her. An endless minute passed, lacerated by her sobbing, a minute and another and a third—then suddenly it was over. She dropped her hands again; she sighed, a sound so sad and so forlorn that any hurt I might have felt was swept away. Gently she reached out to me.

"I never should have said that," she whispered. "Garry, not to *you*. I'm sorry. It's just—just that you're a Westerner. In Asia we see things differently. Besides, though you can see perils in the future, I—I share agonies right now. *Have you ever thought what we've been doing to the animals?* On every highway, Garry? We run them down, but it's not death that counts—" Her hands clutched at mine. "We all die, men and beasts. In the wilds an animal will die, and it'll be eaten, by other beasts and birds of prey and scavenging insects. At least its substance goes to sustain more life."

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"How about men killed in war?" I said. "By earthquakes, tidal waves, tornadoes?"

"We're on a different level. Most of us. Animals *have* to feel their deaths aren't purposeless." Her voice rose. "Garry, did you know that sometimes one caribou will actually *allow* a pack of wolves to eat it? That antelopes in Africa have done the same for hunting lions? They *know*. They know it in the group-souls they share, life after life, until they individualize as men. I know you don't believe that, but it's what Buddhists teach—"

She stroked my face; she let me hold her close. "What have we done to them, for years and years, as our highway speeds went up and our concern went down? Have you ever seen a dead animal even thrown off a freeway, Garry—except deer, because they're big enough to cause accidents? No, no! We leave them there, to be crushed, flattened thin, rubbed into the fabric of our concrete—even their hair, their hides—until they vanish. No other animals can get to them to profit by their deaths, not even buzzards—no, not even ants! And that is what they do not understand, their useless dying, the contemptuous coldness of our disregard; and in their chilly emptiness *they hate us for it*. More and more and more of them. They—they've reached critical mass. It was no hologram that tried to kill us! *They're striking back!*"

I thought about Jung's theory of a mass-subconscious, of group-souls. I remembered the stories of Lord Buddha, feeding his own body to hungry tigers.

"Garry, you've seen Kuniyoshi's prints of monster cats! You've heard the legends, from every continent, of monster dogs and jaguars and wolves! They aren't just legends. They're *real*—but never, never, *never* on this scale. Lover, you *must* believe me! I felt it all when—when we went through that beast."

I did remember the legends I had read. Even the one about the monstrous cat that's said to haunt the lower corridors of the Capitol in Washington—still terrifying patrolling guards at night. I remembered, and in spite of logic, and my own training—and also just because I knew my girl so well—I did believe.

"Marina," I said then, "what can we do?"

"In Japan," she told me, "the people who grow cultured pearls have *segaki* services performed for the spirits of all those oysters who die in making them. Samisen makers have them said for the dogs and cats whose skins are stretched over their instruments. It is an explanation, an apology. That is all they ask."

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"Who could we get to do it here? Christianity tells us animals have no souls. You know, 'the beasts that perish.' "

"Not all Christians believe that," she answered, "nor all ministers, and there are many others who would help."

"And how are we supposed to sell Chief Sam on the idea?"

She kissed me, there next to the haunted highway. "We'll have no trouble there," she declared. "*His* people never did deny that animals have souls."

It took Chief Sam a little while to get things organized, quietly, and without stirring up a mess of controversy. But he managed it, and we were surprised at how many people from how many different faiths came to our assistance. (The media hardly touched it, and when they did they treated it as nut stuff, as a joke.) In ten days the one-car fatal accident rate plummeted; in three weeks it returned to normal. In a month almost everyone had forgotten it completely, and I was trying to.

Then, in February, the Chief and I had to take Emmie Bostwick up to Denver to check out an anonymous assassination warning, which turned out to be baseless. We had an early dinner and headed back, praying that the roads would all be dry and open. We did have bad weather for the first two hours; then it cleared and before we knew it the traffic was all passing us, trying to make up time.

Our first hint of trouble came around ten o'clock when the feeling came to me. I thought, "Not *again!*"—still seeing that enormous wildcat in my mind's eye. Then, to my relief, Emmie started breathing hoarsely, as she always does when one of her impressions starts coming through. "I get a great big car, or maybe it's a bus," she told us. "It's full of men, just men. They—oh, they scare me! Something's gonna happen! One of 'em's up front where he oughtn't to be, up past the—I guess it's wire—and—*oh, no, no! Don't you do it!* Oh, Chief Sam, he's goin' to do something to the driver—with a knife! And—" She shuddered and was silent. "Man! I'm sure glad *that's* gone," she muttered finally.

Chief Sam soothed her and we drove on. It was a full hour before we saw the traffic block, the blue lights, ambulances, wreckers, all clustered around an overpass. I swung our own light down against the windshield, and on the shoulder we passed the long halted line. We stopped behind a knot of police cars. Sam and I got out. The freeway for a hundred yards was strewn with

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shattered metal, torn metal, twisted metal, metal charred out of all recognition, shattered glass, and—well, other things. Above it all there was a great gap in the railing of the overpass.

We found Tod Welles there, in charge. He filled us in. "At least, Colonel," he told Sam, "it's not a one-car deal, so you don't have to worry, but it's really going to be a hell of a mess to clean up. The bus—"

The bus had been State-owned, on its way from Andriess Hospital, maximum security for the criminally insane, loaded with more than 30 of their hopeless cases—all killers who had killed again inside, or tried to. They were being moved to a special new even-more-maximum facility, and one of them—though nobody could figure how—had got to the driver and cut his throat—

Sam and I looked at one another, thinking of Emmie.

—and the bus had plunged straight down into the path of a truck and trailer loaded with steel pipe, trying to make 90 miles an hour. It was like being hit by an express train.

Welles gestured at the road. "Two survivors," he told us. "One guard, one prisoner. About a dozen of the bodies are sort of in one piece. The rest have all been through the shredder. And now it's fixing up to snow." He gestured at a few flakes that had started falling. "We'll be lucky to get the road opened before a storm hits."

The wrecker crews were hauling and pushing metal off the highway; the ambulance men, some carrying stretchers, some with baskets, were going about their grimmer business.

Welles kept looking at his watch. "At least," he said, "It's not like we were dealing with real people, except the driver and the guards. Those men were subhuman, every damn one of 'em. No loss." He shrugged. "Hell, what we can't find of them the big rigs'll take care of."

Chief Sam and I looked at each other once again, and I knew that he and I were thinking the same thing, and I could feel gooseflesh all along my arms.

Then he took Tod Welles aside and spoke to him quietly and very seriously; and we left him there after we'd said goodnight.

"What's he going to do?" I asked, as we walked back.

"He's going to stay till every piece is found—each ear, each finger bone, each scrap of flesh. He doesn't understand, but he'll do what I asked him to." He drew a deep breath. "Garry," he said, "there are some things we mustn't take a chance on. Not *ever*."

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

T. M. Adams' first story, "Alfred Karns, Accessory," appeared in the July 1977 issue of EQMM—a clever tale about an eavesdropper. Mr. Adams' second story has a much subtler concept—about a triangle, with a very odd angle indeed . . .

PROFESSIONAL SUICIDE

by T. M. ADAMS

The middle-aged man with the washed-out gray eyes sat down at the typewriter, hunched his shoulders determinedly, and began typing.

"To whom it may concern."

He stopped for a moment and looked at the five words. *Can't escape clichés in a thing like this,* he decided at length. *No reason to try, anyway.* He gazed about the room, as if for inspiration. The expensive apartment décor mocked him—it was cold and sterile. Only the messy desk showed any sign that the room had been occupied since it had last been made up.

The writer lost an inner struggle, produced a cigarette from the top drawer of the desk, and lit it. *Short, punchy, to the point,* he thought. *Any mistakes, just x them out.* He resumed typing.

"It's finished. Over. I've known it was no good from the start, and now it has ruined my whole life. I've reached a point where I can't live with myself any more, not without becoming someone I don't like.

"What I'm talking about is what has been going on between Loretta Newman and me." He thought a moment, then x'd out "me" and replaced it with "myself."

"If only I had had the guts to tell Carleton about it, I wouldn't be writing this now. But if I really had guts, I would never have taken advantage of Loretta in the first place.

"Taken advantage. That's harsh, but fair. Loretta and Carleton were having marital difficulties, nothing they couldn't have set-

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tled, but I took advantage of it. I'd always had a sort of thing for Loretta, and I was in a good position to make my move. I mean, I was Good Old Jack, Carleton's close friend and literary agent for twenty years. I was virtually a member of the family. And when you're a member of the family you can criticize another member without being thought disloyal.

"It was easy. Loretta would tell me about some argument they'd had, and I'd admit that maybe Carleton had been a little unreasonable. Never very strong stuff, but always solidly on her side. For a long time, I never really thought it would go any further . . .

"The thing is, they were meant for each other, Loretta and Carleton. The sort of problem that was dividing them was pretty trivial. But I was in there, fanning the flame, sometimes thinking that I was just helping Loretta assert herself, sometimes aware that I was a man working towards a goal. And despising myself for it.

"Because I could see what I was doing to Carleton. We used to play golf together every Saturday, and afterwards he'd talk to me. About their troubles. About his inability to express his true feelings to Loretta. And I could see that if only Loretta knew the way Carleton truly felt about her, these little disagreements would dissolve into thin air. Loretta, if you ever read this, I want you to understand that. Carleton's love for you verges on idolatry. That's why I'm writing all this down. Not to drive you and Carleton further apart, but to bring you together again. Loretta, Carleton loves you more than I've ever loved anyone."

The writer was compelled to stop at this point; tears blurred his vision. The cigarette he had been so desperate for a few minutes earlier lay forgotten in the ashtray. Eventually he began again, in a less emotional vein.

"Anyway, it started there, before I had made any overtures, with an intimacy of shared secrets, an intimacy that naturally had to be kept hidden from Carleton, with little meetings that had nothing to do with sex. Or so Loretta thought.

"I laid the groundwork well. The transition between the innocent dates and the clandestine ones was subtle. The first time we kissed, and the evening when we took the next irreversible step"

He grimaced. *I can't write about that.*

"is hard to remember now. Always there was a certain amount of pleasure and a great deal of guilt. But in the beginning it was

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worth it. I had Loretta and I had revenged myself upon Carleton for everything I had ever envied him. Not just his wife, but his writing talent, his sensitivity and emotional depth. But that sort of revenge says a lot about the man who requires it. I've tried to ignore that, but I can't."

He broke off to put in a new sheet of paper. He did not immediately return to work. Instead he looked for the cigarette, relit it, and fumbled with the lowest right-hand drawer of the desk, removing from it a flat leather case. With the same motions he had compulsively repeated a half dozen times that day, he checked the .22 target pistol inside. It was, of course, still loaded. *It'll be quiet,* he thought. *Probably no one will hear. Have to face it, though: someone will find the body, I guess it will be the maid on Thursday. Wouldn't like to see her face.* He laughed sourly, replaced the pistol, and started in again.

"It wasn't the lying to Carleton that got to me. It was the lying to Loretta. The pledges, the promises—all phony. And the steady vilification of a man who still thinks that Jack Adkins is not only his literary agent but also his best friend. Lies and more lies, all into the ear of the woman I was pretending to love."

Mustn't be maudlin, he thought.

"Worst of all was the lying to myself. Telling myself it could go on forever, or nearly forever, and that when I finally wanted it to end, Carleton and Loretta would somehow be reunited. Telling myself that I'm not getting older, that after Loretta there would be others to believe my false front, others to find me attractive. Telling myself that I had a future, with my finances tottering on the edge of ruin.

"I haven't mentioned that yet, have I? I think I've tried to put it out of my mind, to pretend that it's just this other thing that's gone bad on me, not anything so crass as money. But let's face it. If all my gambles had paid off and I had a million in the bank, then my conscience wouldn't give me a twinge about Loretta."

Really very hard to maintain the momentum, he thought, breaking off again. He groped about, picking up from the desktop the various little knickknacks that had accumulated there over the years and examining each as if it were unfamiliar to him. He spent the most time on a framed photograph that showed himself and a florid blond man and a slight dark-haired woman standing between them. When he finally put this aside, it was necessary to turn on the desklamp, for it was growing darker outside.

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"How does it happen to you?" he typed. "You start out living by your wits, hoping that some day your calling, your Career, will hit and make your whole life run on oiled bearings. In the meantime you write some stories, not that you think you're a writer. You sell them, not that they're good. It's the pulp magazine boom of the early Fifties and you're a second-rater, but you get by anyway because everyone's desperate for material. A friend of yours has something he wants to submit, but he's scared. You suggest representing him, and because you're not anything else, you begin to call yourself a literary agent.

"You do a six-month stint editing a chain of four pulp magazines. You're awful at it, but you pick a few bright talents out of the slush pile and now you're their agent, too. You're still a second-rater, but it always takes them a while to realize that and move on. Some of them never do.

"You can deal with the editors and publishers, sure, but you can't really deal with the manuscripts when they need help. Literarily, you don't have what it takes. You tell yourself, after all this isn't your Career, this is just something you're marking time with.

"So you branch out, trying to find your real calling. You take a flyer in real estate. You buy into a new restaurant. Lots of things. And not one of them prospers.

"At this moment none of them is making enough to keep the others above water. It just looks as if you're successful. Until now, when they'll go over my estate and see the ledgers." *That will have to be enough about that.* "And then they'll know Jack Adkins for what he is, they'll know me like—" *as?* "—like I know myself."

The phone rang, startling the gray-eyed man who, in reaching for it, knocked it to the floor. He picked up the receiver and said, "Hello?"

"Hello?" came the reply. "Oh, so you *are* still there? Didn't find a new apartment after all?"

The gray-eyed man reacted guiltily to the friendly, familiar voice. "Uh, yes I did—" he began.

"Don't try to con me," the cheerful voice went on. "Too busy, weren't you? What new project are you into now? I wish you'd tell me."

"I, uh . . . No, I did find a new apartment," the gray-eyed man said. "Just can't move in until the first of the month. How was your trip to the Coast? I didn't expect you back until . . . later."

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"You didn't expect me back at all, friend, I know. When you're working on something new, you lose all track of time. That's why I thought I might have to remind you that Loretta's coming back from her mother's tonight. I thought we might all have a late dinner and celebrate your new apartment. What do you say?"

Doesn't matter what I tell him. "Sure, okay. Why don't you stop by around six-thirty—"

"No, I'll tell you. I'm at the airport, just hanging around. No point in that, right? So I'll come over there. Don't worry, I won't disturb you. See you in half an hour."

"Wait!" the gray-eyed man said—to the dial tone.

He sat frozen in place. *Well, that's that. I've brought him here. Thinking a minute ago about how tough it would be on the maid to find the body. What a laugh! He's the one I'm going to do it to. And what will it do to Loretta?*

He got up from the desk, walked over to the sliding glass door and out onto the terrace. The winter chill rumpled his shoulders. Around him the other terraces were unoccupied. Far below were a few car lights and street lamps, but above was a blackness unrelieved by stars.

Suppose I didn't do it. Suppose I just waited for him now and talked it out with him when he arrived. He continued to stare aimlessly for some time, then shook his head. He re-entered the room, slid the glass door shut behind him, and resumed his seat. His typing was now fast and certain.

"What it comes down to is that I've finally reached the point where I can say, this is my Career: Thief. I'm not just talking about my rigged ledgers. My whole life. My job as Carleton's agent, that's stealing. It's been a long time since he supported himself with potboilers. What he needs now is an agent, no, an advocate, who can put him across as Literature, maybe build him a new reputation under a pseudonym. But I just pass his stuff along and take my cut, as though he needs me to deal with editors who've known him for fifteen years. That's stealing. If we weren't such good friends, he'd know it too.

"And now I've stolen Loretta. I don't deserve her. I don't deserve anything."

Leave it at that? he thought. *No. Something at the end.*

"Sure, I'd like to keep on living. But what do I know, right?"

He reached slowly for the lower right-hand drawer. At that moment he heard a sound at the front door. *Already?* As the un-

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locked door opened, he swore, ripped open the drawer, fumbled the pistol out of its case, and hid it behind his back.

A florid, cheerful blond man appeared in the doorway. "How are you, anyway?" he said.

"Oh, not bad," replied the gray-eyed man.

"Hey, was the maid in here this morning?" the blond man asked, putting down his suitcases. "This place looks as though you haven't been in it at all."

"I've been working at the new place."

"I thought you said you couldn't move in until—"

"Because there's no heat. No heat until the first of the month."

The blond man laughed. "Well, good thing you had this place to fall back on. Look, at least you're working. Terrific. Can I see what you've got?"

"Sure," the gray-eyed man said, rising from the chair, one arm still held behind him. "Sit right here. No, go ahead, sit down, I've finished."

Seating himself, Jack Adkins said, "You know, Carleton, I wish you wouldn't keep me in the dark all the time about what you're doing. I mean, I am your agent. But what do I know, right?—Hey. What are you doing with my pistol?"

An extremely unpleasant thirty seconds later Carleton Newman, his gray eyes darting nervously about the room, applied his late agent's limp fingers lightly to all the keys of the typewriter, then wrapped one of the hands loosely around the pistol. The shot had not been loud, but he found himself hurrying as he wiped his fingerprints from the knickknacks on Jack's desk, from the telephone, from the lower right-hand drawer. Holding the handles with his handkerchief, he took Jack's luggage into the bedroom, then swore—he had almost forgotten—and took the ashtray bearing his distinctive type of cigarette and put it in his pocket, ashes and all.

He cast a last look at the note in the typewriter, its half-sentences and repetitive clauses. Had he successfully imitated Jack or—disaster—just parodied him? *That's the question.*

Wiping the edge of the sliding glass door for fingerprints, he opened it and moved cautiously out onto the terrace. As expected, the other terraces were still unoccupied. *Glad I didn't have to wait in there.* He locked the door behind him, stood alone on the terrace a moment, then climbed over the three-foot wall and six-inch

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gulf that separated Jack's terrace from that of the adjacent apartment. The glass door here remained propped open, and the cold winter air had permeated these rooms. It was a scattered mess anyway, and for just a moment, standing in it, Carleton Newman felt a sense of desolation.

The following morning he breakfasted with his wife, having picked her up at the train station late the night before. They had exhausted the topic of her visit with her mother—as he had expected, the details of her account were few and vague—and she had soon changed the subject.

"Darling, it's a lovely apartment, even messed up like this—you're no housekeeper, dear—but are we sure we want to live right next to Jack?"

"Well, you always said how much you admired his place, and this is just like it. I had planned to stay at Jack's while I looked for a place, you know, but I grabbed this, oh, the day after you . . . both . . . left."

"How *was* Jack's trip?" Loretta asked, a little abruptly. "The West Coast, wasn't it?"

"Haven't heard from him," Carleton said noncommittally.

"Well, that's odd. I mean he's only next door, and he is your agent, after all. And he was so interested in your new project."

"Oh," he said, spearing his grapefruit, "that."

"Well, you can go on being mysterioso about it if it pleases you, dear," Loretta went on, "but I know he wanted to see it."

"What makes you think so? And why are you so sure he's come back today?"

He admired the quickness of her answer. "Well, I called his place, thinking you were staying there. And you weren't, of course, so next I tried to call *him*, and his secretary gave me a number to call on the Coast, and we had a talk. And he said he'd be back today and wanted to see your new stuff—and I guess that's what I get for marrying a mystery writer, darling, you have to know everything."

"Haven't written a mystery story in years," he said, adding maliciously, "So he *was* on the Coast, wasn't he?"

"Yes," she said blithely, "and very cheerful. He said things are going just beautifully now, and he was so happy to hear that you're working again."

"That explains why we haven't heard from him, then," Carleton

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said. "He's moved on to his depressive phase."

"Whatever are you talking about, darling?"

"Haven't you noticed? No, he's always so cheerful when he's with you. But he talks to me, you know, and I see his other side. Something's been preying on his mind, he's been on an emotional seesaw for months now . . . In fact, I've been thinking of taking some of the responsibility off his shoulders."

"What do you mean?" Loretta asked sharply.

"Thought I'd get a new agent. No skin off Jack's nose, with all his other enterprises, and I think he feels guilty about not doing better for me lately."

"That's just ego talking and you know it. The idea of dropping Jack Adkins, the best in the business! Professional suicide—that's what it would be!"

Now she'll change the subject, he thought. *And in a moment make a little joke to keep my mind off it. It's all deception now. Is it really worth living with her any more?*

"What were you working on, anyway?" Loretta asked.

"Just some ghostwriting, dear," he said. "Painful business, really. You have to use enough of your skill to make the stuff readable, but you're stuck with the style of a lesser man. You think how much more meaningful you could make it if you were doing it for . . . speaking in your own . . . " *Is it really worth*—"I'd rather not even talk about it."

"Dear," she said lightly—the predicted joke: "I was wondering. Do ghostwriters have ghost agents?"

He smiled sadly. "Some do," he said.

"Q"

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AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
McClure, James	THE SUNDAY HANGMAN	Harper & Row	$7.95	11/23
Pentecost, Hugh	THE STEEL PALACE	Dodd, Mead & Co.	6.95	11/77

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 480th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . One of the best yardsticks of the vitality and pertinacity of the detective-crime-mystery short story is the number of unpublished writers whose first stories come to our desk. The number has been steadily increasing, and the quality of these first stories is the most heartening it has been in years . . . This first story tells of a lonely widow with only her stormy memories to sustain her—and Jeremiah the squirrel . . .

The author, Joy Hunter (a pseudonym), is a native Oregonian and—hold your breath—the grandmother of five little girls. Her husband is a professor, writer, and public speaker. The author returned to college for a B.A. degree after her three children were all in school. Her present hobbies include oil painting, playing the piano and organ, and writing . . .

THE SQUIRREL CAGE

by JOY HUNTER

Ella held back the faded curtain for the tenth time that day. Her eyes had the stare of one whose memories were rushing stormily across her mind. Her lonely, weatherbeaten house stood far back from the main road among tall fir trees. An early fall wind stirred the heavy branches and a gray squirrel scurried out of sight.

"Come now, Ella," she said aloud to herself, for it was one of her clearer moments, "find something to occupy yourself. You know you can't find satisfaction by wishing Doc would suddenly come driving home. You know he's gone. He wouldn't want you to mourn so."

Turning away from the familiar outdoor sights and sounds, she gave the curtain a flip and the folds hung straight again.

"There, there, Jeremiah!" She glanced at the squirrel's cage by

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the front door. "How would you like me to crack you a nice dry filbert?" Jeremiah seemed to run a little faster in his exercise wheel. Since the car accident and Doc's death, Ella couldn't muster enough desire to clean house. Only the kitchen, living room, bathroom, and one of the bedrooms were kept warm. She avoided the door to the windowless cement-block room that Doc had built onto the living room two years before. Had there been children or grandchildren, Ella might have had reason to keep house—to keep at least one of the other bedrooms ready for use; but it was a lonely place now.

Ella shuffled in her ragged slippers to the oven where she stirred the nuts she was drying. She picked up the biggest one she could find for Jeremiah. As he heard the familiar sound of nuts rubbing together, and the sharp crack of the hammer breaking the shell, he set an even faster pace for himself in the wire cage. Ella felt quite secure with Jeremiah in the house. At the slightest noise outside the front door Jeremiah's squeaky wire exercise wheel served as a good warning system.

A deep friendship was building between the two since Doc's death. Somehow she didn't notice how fat Jeremiah was becoming. She kept feeding him more and more of his favorite food.

"All you want is more nuts," she teased as she returned to his cage. "Here, Jeremiah!"

Visitors seldom came to her door. Ella seldom was seen by the townspeople except at the general store a half mile away. She only occasionally walked there now that she limped since the accident. When she did go shopping, she talked aloud to herself as she shuffled from shelf to shelf. She laughed too loudly in response to Mr. Shipman's efforts at friendship and encouragement. He was obviously concerned. But all she did was pay her bill, leave, then hurry home with her brown-paper bag only half full.

But today Ella was anxious to go outside before the final rays of the sun disappeared among the shadows of the big firs. As she stepped off the front porch, she failed to see how neglected the yard and near woods looked. Fallen limbs lay scattered all about. Flowerbeds were weed-ridden. Only a few of their (hers and Doc's) prizewinning roses were still blooming and soon they would be gone for another cold winter.

She walked among the dry leaves under the nut trees back of the garage, picking up a few more filberts as she went. It was getting dark quickly.

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Before going back into the house she stooped to smell the once-sweet fragrance of her favorite "peace" rose. She smelled each bud still left on the bush. But the fragrance was gone. She clipped one long-stemmed red rosebud with the rusting clippers she had failed to put away the last time she had used them.

"Doc always took such good care of his tools," she said to herself. But still she laid the clippers on the old stump by the front steps, forgetting again to put them away.

The bud vase and single red rose were placed respectfully on top of the old upright piano among dusty, carelessly scattered sheet music. Ella crossed the room and dropped clumsily into the overstuffed chair near Jeremiah. The bud vase reflected beautiful lights from the table lamp by her side. It should have quieted her thoughts. And Jeremiah was quiet.

Supper dishes from the day before still lay in the kitchen sink unwashed. She hadn't eaten a meal today. A cracked filbert now and then deadened any hunger pangs she had felt.

Her once-soft hair lay in a tumult of tangles. Doc's old flannel bathrobe, now tied tightly over her clothing, was comforting and fought off drafts.

But memories came storming across her mind again. They seemed to come again and again lately.

"There was that nurse after the car accident. What was her name? Oh, yes. Miss Frick. She didn't need to stay a whole two weeks after I came home from the hospital," thought Ella with disdain.

"What a nosey nurse she was. She went through everything—every drawer, every shelf, every closet. Said she was 'just cleaning,' but I knew better. Didn't she take my mother-of-pearl locket? I saw it fall from her sweater pocket. I saw it. Then she picked it up again. She didn't think I saw. But I did.

"And then, when I went back to the hospital for those horrid X-rays on my leg that day, Miss Frick stayed behind, asking her lazy son to please drive me.

"And when I returned, I was horrified. The door to the cement-block room was standing open. Wide-open. Doc's room! No one—absolutely no one—ever went into *that* room. It was Doc's room . . . Doc's room . . .

"That's where he kept all his pictures and ribbons for his prize roses," she reminisced. "All his trophies. All his arrowheads. All the beautiful precious stones from all our travels around the

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countries of the world." Her eyes brightened.

"That is why we lived in this small house, because all our fortune was spent collecting those treasures. My precious uncut emerald, my green jade, my beautiful rubies, my lovely diamonds—most of them uncut and unpolished—my treasures.

"It was so private even Mr. Shipman at the general store doesn't know what's in the cement-block room.

"Hush, Jeremiah. No nuts now!

"And to think that awful nurse dared to intrude into Doc's room!

"How did she find the key to get in? I can't remember. Oh, yes, she took the keys to warm the house that first day she brought me back home. That was it. When I came home from the hospital. What a wicked nurse. She *stole* that key. But I got it back, didn't I, Jeremiah?"

As all these hateful thoughts crowded in on her, Ella lifted herself slowly from the big chair and limped off to her bedroom. She returned fondling the precious key. She walked across the living room, following the narrow path between stacks of dusty magazines, past the piano where Doc used to play *My Wild Irish Rose,* past the boxes of half-sorted clothing that had belonged to him, past Doc's desk scattered now with papers from his personal files, past his music stand, his open saxophone case, and the tarnished golden sax.

She walked beyond the table where the telephone lay off the hook, near his dusty recliner. Slowing her tread, she walked up to the locked door to the cement-block room.

At first the key was upside down. Ella fumbled until the key found its way into the lock. As the key turned slowly, a smile pinched her dry cheeks. The door opened easily.

"There you are! You won't do it again, will you, Miss Frick?" But Miss Frick's lifeless body lay on the floor just inside the door where Ella had dragged it.

The terrible racket in Jeremiah's squirrel cage was the only sound in the house as Sheriff Caldwell's unexpected knock pounded on the front door.

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 481st "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . A strange story, with a mood and suspense that will remind you of "The Turn of the Screw," a story of dark and terrifying implications . . .

The author, Barbara Williamson, is in her middle thirties, single, and a native Georgian. Although not a professional librarian, she is a member of the Emory University Library staff, and "hence I'm right where I want to be—surrounded by more than a million books." Her one regret is that she'll "never be able to read them all."

Ms. Williamson is a history buff, with a keen interest in the military history of the Civil War and the campaigns of World War II. She likes to cook, enjoys films, and has an "enthusiasm" for "things that go bump in the night" . . .

THE THING WAITING OUTSIDE

by BARBARA WILLIAMSON

A cold wind came down from the hills that night and in their room under the peaked roof the children turned their faces toward the sound.

"It's only the wind," the father said.

"Just the wind," said the mother.

There were two beds in the room, a dresser painted white, and under the windows, a table with small bright chairs.

The walls of the room were light yellow, like the first spring sunlight. In their glow the dolls and fire engines, the pasteboard castle with its miniature knights, even the sad-faced Harlequin puppet shimmered with warmth. The plush animals became as soft as down, and the mane on the rocking horse was a crest of foam.

The children, a boy of eight and a girl of six, were already in their beds. The light glistened on their faces, their pale silken

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hair. They were beautiful children. Everyone said so, even strangers, and their parents always smiled and placed proud hands on their shining heads.

Now in the yellow light with the wind brushing the windows, the children listened to their father.

He sat on the side of the boy's bed and spoke quietly. The mother sat with the girl, her fingers now and then touching the sleeve of her daughter's nightgown. The faces of both parents were troubled.

The father said, "You do understand about the books? Why I had to take them away?"

The boy did not turn his eyes from his father's face, but he could feel the emptiness of the shelves across the room.

He said, "Will you ever put them back?"

His father laid a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Yes, of course," he said. "In time. I *want* you to read, to enjoy your books." He looked now at the girl and smiled. "I'm very proud of both of you. You read so well and learn so quickly."

The mother smiled too and gave the girl's hand a gentle squeeze.

The father said, "I think maybe this whole thing is my fault. I gave you too many books, encouraged you to read to the point of neglecting other things that are important. So for a while the only books I want you to read are your school books. You'll do other things—paint pictures, play games. I'll teach you chess, I think. You'll both like that."

"And we'll do things together," the mother said. "Take bike rides and walks up into the hills. And when it's spring, we'll have a croquet set on the lawn. And we'll go on picnics."

The children looked at their parents with wide dark eyes. And after a moment the boy said, "That will be nice."

"Yes," said the girl. "Nice."

The mother and father glanced at each other and then the father leaned over and cupped a hand under the boy's chin.

"You know now, don't you, that you did not really see and speak to the people in the books. They were only here in your imagination. You did not *see* the Lilliputians or *talk* to the Red Queen. You did not *see* the cave dwellers or *watch* the tiger eat one of them. They were not *here* in this room. You know that now, don't you?"

The boy looked steadily into his father's eyes.

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"Yes," he said, "I know."

The girl nodded her head when the father turned to her.

"We know," she said.

"Imagination is a wonderful thing," the father said to both of them. "But it has to be watched, or like a fire it can get out of control. You'll remember that, won't you?"

"Yes," the boy said, and again the girl nodded, her long hair gleaming in the light.

The father smiled and got to his feet. The mother rose too and smoothed the blankets on both beds. Then they each kissed the children good night with little murmurs of love and reassurance.

"Tomorrow," the father said, "we'll make some plans."

"Yes," the children said, and closed their eyes.

After the mother and father were gone and the room was dark, the children lay still for what seemed to them a long time. The wind rattled the windows and beyond the hills the moon began to rise.

At last the girl turned to her brother. "Is it time?" she asked.

The boy didn't answer. Instead, he threw back his blanket and crossed the room to the windows. Below, the fields were silvered by the moon, but the hills were a black hulk against the sky.

"Anything could come down from there," he said. "Anything."

The girl came to stand beside him, and together they looked out into the night and thought about the thing waiting outside.

Then the girl said, "Will you take them the book now?"

"Yes," the boy said.

He turned from the windows and went to the dresser. Kneeling on the floor, he pulled open a bottom drawer and felt carefully beneath the socks and undershirts. The girl came over and knelt beside him. Their white faces flowered in the darkness of the room.

They both smiled when the boy took the book out of its hiding place. They rose from the floor and the boy clasped the book in his arms. He said, "Don't start until I get back."

"Oh, I won't," the girl said. "I wouldn't."

Still holding the book close, the boy went to the door of the room, opened it softly, and stepped out into the hall.

It was a large house and very old, and deep inside it the wind was only a whisper of sound. The boy listened for a moment, then started down the stairs. The carpet was thick under his bare feet and the railing felt as cold as stone beneath his hand.

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Downstairs, a faint spicy smell from the day's baking still lingered in the air. He walked to the back of the house, past dark rooms where mirrors winked from the light in the hall, and night lay thick across the floors.

The mother and father were in the room next to the kitchen. There was a fire in a small grate and empty coffee cups on a table. On the walls were photographs of the children. They looked out into the room with secret smiles.

The mother was seated on the sofa near a shaded lamp. Her lap was full of pink yarn and her knitting needles flashed in the firelight.

The father leaned back in a big leather chair, his eyes on the ceiling, his fingers curled around the bowl of his favorite pipe.

The fire sighed and sparks rose up the chimney. The boy's eyes flicked to the corners of the room where the shadows had retreated from the firelight.

From the doorway he said, "I couldn't sleep until I brought you this." And he went into the room toward his parents, holding the book out to them.

"I hid it, but that wasn't right, was it?"

They came to him then. His mother took him into her arms and kissed him, and his father said that he was a fine honest boy.

The mother held him in her lap for a few minutes and warmed his feet with her hands, and her eyes glistened in the light of the fire. They spoke softly to him for a time and he listened and answered "yes" and "no" at the right times, and then he yawned and said that he was sleepy and could he please go back to bed?

They took him to the stairs and kissed him and he went up alone without looking back.

In the room at the top of the house the girl was waiting for him. He nodded his head and then they climbed into their beds and joined hands across the narrow space between. Moonlight lay on the floor in cold slabs and the wind now washed against the windows with a shushing sound.

"Now," the boy said, gripping the girl's hand tightly. "And, remember, it's harder when the book is somewhere else."

They did not move for a long time. Their eyes stared at the ceiling without blinking. Sweat began to glisten on their faces and their breathing grew short and labored. The room flowed around them. Shadow and light merged and parted like streams in the sea.

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When the sounds from below began to reach them, they still did not move. Their joined hands, slick with sweat, held firm. Their muscles strained and corded. Their eyes burned and swam with the shifting light and darkness.

At last the sounds from the bottom of the house stopped. Silence fell around them, cooling their faces, soothing their feverish eyes.

The boy listened and then said, "It's done. You know what to do now, don't you?"

"Yes," the girl said. She slid her hand out of his, brushed her hair back from her face, and closed her eyes. She smiled and thought of a garden filled with flowers. There was a table in the center of the garden and on the table were china plates. Each plate held a rainbow of iced cakes. There were pink ones and yellow ones and some thick with chocolate. Her tongue flicked over her lips as she thought of how sweet they would taste.

The boy thought of ships—tall ships with white sails. He brought a warm wind out of the south and sent the ships tossing on a sea that was both blue and green. Waves foamed over the decks and the sailors slipped and laughed, while above their heads gulls wheeled in the sky, their wings flashing in the sun.

At the time agreed upon, just as the windows began to lighten, the children rose from their beds and went downstairs.

The house was very cold. The shadows were turning to gray and in the room next to the kitchen the fire was dead, its coals turned to feathery ash.

The mother lay in a corner of the room, near the outside wall. The father was a few feet away. He still held the fireplace poker in his hand.

The boy's eyes moved over the room quickly. "I'll find the book," he said. "You go open the door to the terrace."

"Why that one?"

The boy gave her a hard look. "Because that's the one with the catch that slips. It had to get in some way, didn't it?"

The girl turned, then she looked back and said, "Then can we have breakfast?"

The boy had begun moving around the room, looking under tables, poking under the sofa. "There's no time," he said.

"But I'm hungry!"

"I don't care," the boy said. "It's the cleaning lady's day and we have to be asleep when she gets here. We'll eat later."

"Maybe pancakes? With syrup?"

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The boy didn't look at her. "Maybe," he said. "Now go open the door like I told you."

The girl stuck her tongue out at him. "I wish I was the oldest," she said.

"Well, you're not," the boy said, turning and glaring at her. "Now go and do like I said."

The girl tossed her hair back in a gesture of defiance, but she left the room, not hurrying, and in the hall she began to hum a little tune to annoy him.

The boy did not notice. He was becoming anxious now. Where could the book be? It wasn't on the table. And it couldn't be out of the room. He saw it then, on the floor, under the shattered lamp.

He hurried to it and his hands were shaking when he picked it up, brushing the bits of glass away. He examined it carefully, turning the pages, running his fingers over the smooth binding, the embossed letters of that title. Then he smiled. It was all right. There weren't even any spatters of blood.

He closed the covers and hugged the book to his chest. A great joy welled inside him. It was one of his favorite stories. Very soon, he promised himself, he would read *The Hound of the Baskervilles* again.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 482nd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a first story that packs a terrific wallop . . .

The author, Wayne J. Gardiner, is in his early thirties. He is the General Marketing Analyst of the "Chicago Tribune." His hobbies include all sports, particularly golf, basketball, and tennis; he also lists writing—but come to think of it, is writing a hobby? Now that he has "broken into print," Mr. Gardiner can consider writing more than just one of his hobbies . . .

THE HEADACHE

by WAYNE J. GARDINER

The antiseptic smell of the doctor's waiting room drifted out to meet him as he opened the door and stepped inside.

The room was quiet. Behind the reception desk a nurse tended to paperwork. In a chair in the opposite corner a middle-aged woman leafed through a copy of *National Geographic*.

Just like the other places.

The thought surprised him. He couldn't remember ever having been in a doctor's waiting room before. It puzzled him and he tried to think about it—he'd forgotten what always happened when he did that.

The pain in the back of his head began to build up again and he dismissed the puzzling thought from his mind.

The nurse looked up. "May I help you, sir?"

"I'm here for my appointment," he said.

"Yes, sir . . . and what is your name?"

The pain began to intensify. "I have a three-thirty appointment," he said.

"Yes . . . and the name?"

Why was this such a problem? He knew his name was Harold

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Johnson. What was there to think about?

But he *did* have to think—and the pain grew worse. What was it—he didn't want to attract the attention of the lady in the corner—and finally it came to him.

"Robert Green," he said. He didn't know why he had given that name.

He didn't want to think about it.

"Oh, yes . . . Mr. Green. This is your first visit to our office?" She riffled through the drawer of the desk. "There are a few questions I have to ask you."

The pain, which had abated, began to build again.

"Who recommended the doctor to you?"

It took a moment. His head began to throb. "I'm new in the city. I found his name in the telephone directory."

"And your address?"

He gave a fictitious address.

The nurse wrote a few words on the form and handed it to him. "If you'll just finish filling this out . . ."

He took a seat.

A door at the right of the reception area opened and an old man came out. After the nurse made arrangements for his next visit, the man shuffled to the exit, closing the door behind him.

"Mrs. Dixon," the nurse called. The middle-aged lady who had been reading the magazine set it aside and the nurse escorted her into the doctor's examining office.

Head pounding, he struggled through the form. By the time he completed it, it had become almost impossible to conceal the pain.

The nurse sensed his discomfort. "Are you all right, Mr. Green?" she asked.

What a stupid question! If he were all right would he be here?

"I'm all right," he said. "Just a little headache."

"Please have a seat. The doctor will be with you shortly."

It was ten minutes before the middle-aged lady came out of the examining room. The pain had lessened somewhat.

"Mr. Green," the nurse said.

She showed him through the door and down a hallway to another door which she opened. "Please have a seat. The doctor will be with you in a moment."

He didn't like the room. He didn't like the instruments and equipment. For some reason that he didn't understand, he was suddenly afraid.

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The pain increased.

The doctor walked into the room with a chart the nurse had prepared for him.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Green," he said cheerfully. "What can I do for you today?"

"If I knew that, Doctor, I wouldn't be here. I would have done something myself." He hadn't been able to control the edge in his voice.

If the doctor noticed the irritable tone of his voice, it didn't appear to bother him. "So you've been having headaches?"

"Severe headaches."

The doctor looked into his eyes with a light. "How long have you been getting them?"

He thought. The pressure inside his head kept building. "I don't know."

The doctor raised an eyebrow. "You don't know? Surely you must have an idea about how long this has been bothering you. Think about it."

He tried, but the pain was becoming intense again. "Four weeks," he said in desperation.

The doctor was listening to his heartbeat, moving the stethoscope across his chest and back.

"What brings on these headaches?"

He fought it, but the pain was intolerable. A tear slid down his cheek, then another. He brushed them away with the back of his hand. "I don't know!"

The doctor ran his hands skillfully across his head. "Have you been in an accident lately, Mr. Green? Have you had a fall perhaps? A blow to the head?"

He tried to consider each question individually, but they had come too fast. In quick succession they had bombarded his mind with relentless charges of nerve-jangling pain, unbearable pain that now threatened to erupt inside his head. Panic gripped him. There was no longer any question about it—the pain would destroy him! He felt consciousness slipping away. He could hear the voice of the doctor in the distance. "Mr. Green, what are you doing?"

He made one last effort to think about it, one last effort to understand what he really *was* doing. But in that instant an explosion burst inside his head. "I don't know!" he screamed. White-hot flashes of pain obscured his vision. He grabbed instinctively for

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something to defend himself. His hand closed on a nearby object. He struck out with it—

The first edition of the afternoon paper carried a small box on the front page:

DOCTOR SLAIN IN OFFICE

Nurse Also Dies in 4th Medical Murder in 3 Weeks

For the fourth time in the past three weeks a city doctor has been found murdered in a downtown office building.

According to authorities, Dr. Benjamin Bradley, 58, and his nurse, Martha Turner, 46, both died of head injuries. The fatal blows were apparently inflicted by a heavy metal paperweight found near their bodies.

The victims were discovered in the doctor's examination room at 201 S. Martin Street by a patient who had come for a 4:30 appointment.

Police are searching for a man named Robert Green, whose medical record was found in the room with the two bodies . . .

Harold Johnson put the paper down and shook his head regretfully. What a tragedy! He glanced again at the story. "Robert Green," he said aloud. The name sounded familiar. Where had he heard it? He thought about it.

A small aching began in the back of his head.

He shrugged and forgot about trying to remember where he'd heard the name Robert Green. It was a common name anyway.

But the newspaper story had brought something else to his mind.

I really should get in touch with a doctor one of these days, he thought—make an appointment—see about these headaches. They're getting to be real killers.

"Q"

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

SERIES SLEUTH SALUTE: It is perhaps the most extraordinary artistic achievement of man to be able to create something, or someone, out of nothing except a fertile mind. It is the nearest that a human being can come to playing, if not being, God. Vladimir Nabokov said that he almost felt as if he were somehow cheating the Creator by creating something himself.

Perhaps, then, it would be appropriate to applaud those whose series detectives—those memorable heroes of fiction—have become as real and lifelike as many of the people we meet in our day-to-day lives.

FATHER BREDDER: A Corner of Paradise (St. Martin's, $7.95) is the 11th in Leonard Holton's pleasing series about the Los Angeles priest. Dating back to 1959, this likable clergyman bears no resemblance to the more famous Father Brown, but he is a far more credible character.

SERGEANT CRIBB: Peter Lovesey's tastefully humorous adventures of the Victorian police detectives, Sergeant Cribb and Constable Thackeray, are deservedly being made available in paperback. The latest in this format, with a properly evocative cover, is *A Case of Spirits* (Penguin, $1.95).

SUPERINTENDENT DALZIEL: Continuing the series begun in 1970, Reginald Hill has produced another excellent police novel involving the somewhat conservative, twinkle-eyed Andrew Dalziel. Although he plays a smaller role than one might prefer in *Ruling Passion* (Harper & Row, $8.95), he is at the top of his largish form.

87TH PRECINCT: Not the first, but clearly the most successful series of police-procedural novels are Ed McBain's vigorous narratives of the cases tackled by members of the Eight Seven. *Long Time No See* (Random House, $7.95) is the latest, longest, most complex, and among the strangest of a series that is never ordinary.

PETER STYLES: The 14th novel about the ace reporter for *News-*

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view Magazine again features Styles in the midst of ugly terrorism. *Five Roads to Death* (Dodd, Mead, $6.95) is another tribute to the tireless imagination of Judson Philips who, as Hugh Pentecost, also writes about the wonderful Pierre Chambrun.

HENRY TIBBETT: Among the most skillful novelists active in the mystery genre is Patricia Moyes, whose Scotland Yard superintendent has been solving crimes since 1959. Recently reprinted in paperback is one of the best in this series, *Black Widower* (Penguin, $1.95). That publisher deserves a special salute, incidentally, for its policy of producing a large number of good mysteries in handsome format, under the editorial direction of Julian Symons.

(UNNAMED): Hammett's Continental Op had no name, nor does Len Deighton's secret agent (although he is called Harry Palmer in the movies). Bill Pronzini has added a distinguished private eye to those anonymous crimefighters. The fourth in his series about the San Francisco detective is *Blowback* (Random House, $6.95) and there is every reason to believe that it will be a very long-running series indeed.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

The most interesting young thriller director working in Europe today is the Italian Dario Argento, 33. After some years as film critic for a leading Rome newspaper, Dario in 1970 both wrote and directed his first (and perhaps still best) film, which he was determined would be a mystery. In *Bird with the Crystal Plumage,* a young American artist in Rome (Tony Musante) witnesses what appears to be a murderous attack on a young woman in a darkened art gallery—and is plunged into vortex of terror. *Cat o' Nine Tales* (1971) has Karl Malden as a blind detective involved in killings at an eerie research clinic. *Four Flies on Gray Velvet* (1972) uses as part of its final revelations images photographed on the retina of a dead man—a chestnut Dario swears was actually done recently by Berlin police. (Dario claims that together the titles of these first three films form his mystery bestiary.) In *Deep Red* (1975) the bizarre death of a woman psychic and a child's drawing are forces prodding a young musician into solving a long-ago murder. In current release, *Suspiria* (trans-

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lation: *Heavy Sighs)* is a less satisfying occult drama set in an ancient German dance academy —but, like all Argento films, richly visual and almost oppressively atmospheric. Dario claims his childhood was strongly influenced by Poe, his cinema by such German expressionists as Lang and Murnau; he is actually a dark, continental Hitchcock, about to bring his gifts to America. Next Spring he will *produce* —in Pennsylvania—George Romero's sequel to his Gothic underground cult success, *Night of the Living Dead,* and direct a mystery in New York, having recently been smitten by the city's architecture—"the sidestreets, doors, stairs." *Ciao,* Dario.

Approximately 780 police are killed in the line of duty yearly. There are therefore that many scripts for the officer survival program of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Photographic Reserve Unit, a unique department which shoots film re-enacting what should *not* be done in arrest procedures as training tools for police departments around the country. With the farsighted encouragement of Sheriff Peter J. Pitchess, and supervised by Sergeant Robert F. Dixon, the unit calls on Hollywood studio cameramen and professionals (among them: EQMM's Edgar-winning John Ball, himself a volunteer sheriff). The films deal with such topics as street robberies, barricaded hostages, approaching armed suspects, proper handcuffing—situations that could easily become disastrous for police officers who lower their guard. Upcoming documents will feature such narrators as Bill Conrad and Lee Merriwether. Realistically staged, and strong on shock to bring home its cautionary messages, these often bloody visions circulated by the L.A. County Sheriff's Department are laudatory attempts to increase police safety and crime prevention. Good job.

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INTERVIEW: PETE HAMILL

One of the best-known newspapermen in America, Pete Hamill is equally familiar with political, social, and criminal reportage. He has won the Meyer Berger Award of the Columbia School of Journalism. A great fan of the mystery in its many forms, his lifelong ambition has been fulfilled with the publication of a story in *EQMM.* He has written several motion pictures and his first suspense novel, *A Killing for Christ* (1968), enjoyed considerable success. He is now writing a series of mystery novels.

EQMM: You seem to like private eyes.

HAMILL: Yes, I do. I just reread three or four Mickey Spil-

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lanes last year and think he is terrifically underrated. One of the reasons for it is that he is right wing, and so many literary critics are left wing. Even when Mike Hammer isn't out to get the Commies, he has vigilante values, and that offends them. But he has a sense of New York City, for instance, that is much better than that of more ambitious, or more pretentious, writers. There is a raw power in his books that makes you want to know just what his hero is going to do next —which you don't particularly care about when you're reading *Gravity's Rainbow*. Whatever his philosophy, at least Spillane is moving people around, not just words.

EQMM: Is the hero of your new novel, *The Biggest Killing of Them All* (Bantam, due in January), anything like Hammer?

HAMILL: Not exactly. The book is about a reporter, written in the first person, and he'll be a continuing character. His name is Briscoe. The character has many autobiographical elements — the guy used to write a newspaper column—and it has real people from New York involved in it.

EQMM: And the reporter acts as a detective?

HAMILL: More or less. He gets caught up in events, as actually does happen. It is an attempt to create a left-wing hero. It is handled like the left-wing thrillers of the late 1930s. Bond and Spillane and those characters are essentially conservative, with Communist enemies. Briscoe's enemies are multinational corporations, the CIA, FBI, secret police forces.

EQMM: Was it your decision to go directly to a paperback publisher?

HAMILL: Yes. Mark Jaffe at Bantam has been a friend for years. He, by the way, edited Spillane for many years. And I think these books are mainly for a mass audience. To communicate these ideas to the largest audience possible, I think it's a good idea to skip the hardcover phase altogether because it takes too long to get into paperback then.

EQMM: Do you enjoy writing mysteries, and will you produce more stories for EQMM?

HAMILL: I have ideas for about six stories now. I'm very interested in exploring the same themes that interest me in journalism: time, the passage of time, what time does to people, how they change, what they do in a crisis, whether that crisis is huge or small. It seems to me that a definition of a crime story always involves a large crisis, and if it's a story about murder it involves the ultimate crisis. Crime fiction is crisis fiction.

"Q"

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Competition for the 1977 Edgar award for best American first mystery is going to be unusually stiff. To the names of David Linzee, Robert Lee Hall, Jon A. Jackson, and Lawrence Meyer can now be added Judith Richards, whose *The Sounds of Silence* (Putnam, $8.95) is an exceptionally compelling novel of suspense, conflict, and the human spirit. The setting is a mansion in Alabama, the main characters 60-year-old reluctant heiress Aramenta Lee and her hired man Virgil Wilson, whose goal of becoming a writer seems an impossible one for a person born deaf.

The author's clear intention is to educate and inform her readers about the problems and potentialities of the deaf, but she never lets her didactic impulses stand in the way of a fine story. (****)

Though the title and the sickly sweet pink dust jacket may put off many mystery fans, Anna Gilbert's *The Look of Innocence* (St. Martin's, $8.95) is a distinguished work in the romantic suspense *genre,* sensitively written and skilfully constructed, without the painfully obvious plot turns common to so many gothics. Though gentle and muted in style in contrast to more pyrotechnic gothics, the book has what so many writers in the field profess to strive for but seldom achieve: a strong heroine. The scene is an English village, the time the late nineteenth century. (****)

*** John Lutz: *Bonegrinder,* Putnam, $7.95 . In the third novel by a well known short story specialist, several mysterious deaths, supposedly caused by a mysterious lake creature, terrorize a small Ozark town one hot summer. The background is rendered in all its sticky discomfort. Lutz sustains almost total mystification down to the last six pages. The solution is logical and fairly clued.

*** Barbara Ninde Byfield: *A Harder Thing Than Triumph,* Doubleday Crime Club, $6.95. Murder strikes an upper-crust rural retirement community in the Berkshires and Anglican Father Simon Bede investigates. Nice puzzle, interesting people, smooth style.

*** Thomas Cullinan: *The Eighth Sacrament,* Putnam, $7.95. A mystery of murdered nuns in an Ohio convent is solved by their 35-year-old Mother Superior. The culprit is highly predictable, but well sustained suspense and the internal conflicts of the main character carry the day.

*** Peter Hochstein: *The Fatal Fetish,* Berkley, $1.50. A series of sex-related booby traps is dis-

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patching U.N. officials, and marginally competent, hernia-ridden cop Bert Cranshaw is trying to find the truth. Ribald, farcical, and ingenious, told in overblown comical prose.

*** John Wainwright: *A Pool of Tears,* St. Martin's, $7.95. The latest from a fine storyteller combines kidnaping, British race relations, World War II flashbacks, an unconventional love story, and little McBainish essays on the nature of police work. The highly charged style constantly risks but escapes bathos.

*** Anna Clarke: *This Downhill Path,* McKay, $7.95. A young working class scholar believes he has found the mysterious unknown lover of a Victorian lady poet who died mysteriously 60 years before. Strong on character and atmosphere, this sustains reader interest on several levels.

There are strong current entries from several series. Ivor Drummond's trio of Lady Jennifer, Colly, and Sandro visit India and battle the Thugs in *The Necklace of Skulls* (St. Martin's, $7.95), an expert action thriller with the spirit of an old movie serial. (***) . . . James Fraser's Superintendent Bill Aveyard deals with a storm and its criminous aftermath in the village of Bollaston in *Heart's Ease in Death* (Doubleday Crime Club, $6.95), an intricate and thoughtful puzzle-procedural. (***) . . . Knute Severson, former Boston cop and now police chief of Wellesley, Massachusetts, struggles with small-town politics, eccentric citizens, and murder in Tobias Wells' *A Creature Was Stirring* (Doubleday Crime Club, $6.95), a pleasant and loosely gripping entry in a notoriously uneven series. (***) . . . Scotland Yard's Merle Capricorn, the son of a magician and escape artist, produces a finale worthy of his family background in Pauline Glen Winslow's *The Witch Hill Murder* (St. Martin's, $7.95), a fine puzzle concerning a strange religious cult, the star-worshipping Sidereans, who have taken over an English manor house, and their tense relations with the neighboring town, culminating in murder. A good job in the vein of Ngaio Marsh and P. D. James. (***)

Among the recent reprints is a new paperback edition of Gaston Leroux's classic 1907 novel *The Mystery of the Yellow Room* (Dover, $3.00), once called by John Dickson Carr's Dr. Fell "the best detective tale ever written." Besides being one of the all-time locked room masterpieces, it has one of the great opening chapter titles: "In Which We Begin Not to Understand." Fans of science fiction-mystery hybrids should look into Isaac Asimov's 1968 collection, *Asimov's Mysteries* (Fawcett Crest, $1.50), and Ben Bova's 1976 future-political thriller, *The Multiple Man* (Del Rey-Ballantine, $1.75), in which a Presidential advisor keeps stumbling over puzzling duplicates of his boss.

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REVIEWS OF NEW BOOKS

FACES OF MYSTERY, Edited by Ellery Queen. The Dial Press, $8.95.

This hardcover edition of *Ellery Queen's Anthology* #34 includes a short novel by the magnetic Rex Stout, 3 novelets by the intriguing Georges Simenon, Lawrence G. Blochman, and Julian Symons, and 14 stories by such enduring talents in the mystery field as Dick Francis, Hugh Pentecost, Michael Gilbert, Robert L. Fish, Patricia Highsmith, and Ellery Queen.

The collection mirrors a variety of crimes, characters, and settings —all brought together by the ingenious editor in whose magazine most of the stories first appeared.

THE MACKIN COVER, by Diane K. Shah. Dodd, Mead, $7.95.

Two weeks before the Super Bowl, star quarterback Alexander Mackin is kidnaped. But is the kidnaping real or has Mackin arranged his own disappearance? Magazine reporter Lindsie Hollis cannot accept official explanations of Mackin's disappearance—just as she has difficulty believing in his clean-cut superstar image. Her search for the true story takes her to Mexico—and into the arms of Mackin's supposed kidnapers where she finally learns the truth about Alex Mackin.

"The book moves at a rapid pace to a satisfying sensational climax. Heroine and hero are both realistically conceived. Sharp dialogue and deft twists."—*Publishers Weekly*

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	RETAIL PRICE	DISCOUNTED PRICE
Atwater, James D.	TIME BOMB	Viking	$10.00	$8.00
Byfield, Barbara Ninde	A HARDER THING THAN TRIUMPH	Doubleday Crime Club	6.95	5.50
Clarke, Anna	*THIS DOWNHILL PATH*	McKay	7.95	6.35
Delman, David	THE NICE MURDERERS	Morrow	7.95	6.35
Drummond, Ivor	THE NECKLACE OF SKULLS	St. Martin's	7.95	6.35
Edited by Ellery Queen	FACES OF MYSTERY	Dial Press	8.95	6.95
Fraser, James	HEART'S EASE IN DEATH	Doubleday Crime Club	6.95	5.50
Gilbert, Anna	THE LOOK OF INNOCENCE	St. Martin's	8.95	6.95
Gillis, Jackson	THE KILLERS OF STARFISH	Lippincott	8.95	6.95
Hill, Reginald	RULING PASSION	Harper & Row	8.95	6.95
Holton, Leonard	A CORNER OF PARADISE	St. Martin's	7.95	6.35
McBain, Ed	*LONG TIME NO SEE*	Random House	7.95	6.35
Philips, Judson	FIVE ROADS TO DEATH	Dodd, Mead	6.95	5.50
Pronzini, Bill	BLOWBACK	Random House	6.95	5.50
Roueche', Berton	FAGO	Harper & Row	8.95	6.95
Shah, Diane K.	THE MACKIN COVER	Dodd, Mead	7.95	6.35
Simenon, Georges	*THE IRON STAIRCASE*	Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich	7.95	6.35
Taschdjian, Claire	THE PEKING MAN IS MISSING	Harper & Row	10.00	8.00
Wainwright, John	A POOL OF TEARS	St. Martin's	7.95	6.35
Wells, Tobias	A CREATURE WAS STIRRING	Doubleday Crime Club	6.95	5.50
Winslow, Pauline Glen	THE WITCH HILL MURDER	St. Martin's	7.95	6.35
Wittenborn, Dirk	ECLIPSE	Dodd, Mead	8.95	6.95

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a NEW short story by

BARBARA CALLAHAN

A strange story even for Barbara Callahan, author of such strange stories as "The Sin Painter" (her debut in print), "Lavender Lady," "To Be Continued," "Don't Cry, Sally Shy," "November Story," and "The Pinwheel Dream." Barbara Callahan has her own vision of how people think and act and feel, and often her vision illuminates dark corners . . .

THE MAN WITH THE YELLOW HAIR

by BARBARA CALLAHAN

When I'm really hurting, I talk to Jeremy Brentwood, a beautiful child with an elegant name. Lately I've been hurting so much that every day after school I deposit my pain in his healing hands. I tell him about Mom's crying and Dad's shouting and he sits patiently on the floor while I unload. When he thinks I've finished, he comes over to me and tugs at my arm with his gentle hands until I slide off the sofa to the rug and begin to empty out the box of Lego's, those snap-together building pieces that Jeremy loves.

Jeremy is 13 years old, a special child who goes to St. Andrew's School for Exceptional Children during the day where he learns to perform simple tasks from people who learn from him. I think Jeremy Brentwood is one of the loveliest creatures in the universe, a human being who is wrapped in a mantle of innocence that will never need mending.

For two years since I was a sophomore, I've been minding Jeremy after school until his mother comes home from work. I had to give up a chance at making the cheerleading squad to take the job but I didn't mind because I didn't much feel like cheering about anything at the time. My mother, who used to greet each

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day as if it were a music box to be turned on and danced to, began to hear dirges instead of the tinkly notes that once set the ballerina to dancing. She fled from the terrors of morning back to her bed where she lay all day until Dad came home to lead her out of the underworld like Orpheus in my mythology book. The many doctors she has seen call her problem "depression."

"Depression, Jeremy," I told him, "means 'pushing down' like I'm pushing down this red Lego piece into the rug. I finally found out what's pushing Mom down lately. My Dad's having an affair."

Jeremy picked up the red Lego and put it on top of the head of the person I had made for him out of the little plastic pieces.

"Now he's a fireman. He has a red hat," said Jeremy.

"I heard Mom shouting at Dad this morning that she knows he's seeing another woman. He used to deny her accusations but today he didn't. Something's going to happen, Jeremy. Either my Dad is going to walk out or my Mom is going to end up back in the hospital. I'm starting to feel like I'm going to come unsnapped like these Lego people we make. One more scene and my head, arms, and legs are going to clatter to the floor."

Jeremy picked up a blue Lego and put it on the head of the other man I'd made.

"Now he's a policeman. He has a blue hat."

I sighed as I started to put together another person. "Jeremy, you are so soothing. When I tell you my problems, you don't come up with the clichés like 'hang in there, kid, things will work out.' You stick to the job at hand, the problem that can be solved, the Lego person that can be made. Jeremy Brentwood, I love you."

Jeremy ferreted through the pile of Legos remaining on the floor, looking for a colored one. Finding only white pieces, he started putting the Legos into the box. As he did, I spotted a yellow piece. I took it and put it on top of the person I had just made.

"A yellow hat, Jeremy. Now who wears a yellow hat?"

I scratched my head. Who did wear a yellow hat? A construction worker? I wasn't sure.

"I don't know who wears a yellow hat, Jeremy, so let's just say this is a man with yellow hair, a blond-haired man."

Jeremy did the strangest thing. He took the Lego person out of my hand and threw it across the room. The Lego person bounced against the coffee table, came apart, and flew in all different directions. Jeremy went over to the remains and carefully picked them up, putting every piece into the box except one, the yellow

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piece. When he went to the closet to put the box away, I picked up the yellow Lego and pocketed it. A man with blond hair was upsetting Jeremy and I intended to find out who it was.

Mrs. Brentwood came in and I considered asking her if she knew of a blond-haired man whom Jeremy disliked, but as usual she said hello and breezed past me into the kitchen to start rattling pots and pans. Jeremy followed her and started to set the table. I stood in the doorway watching her skirt swing against the cabinet door, her sleeves sweep across the counter tops, and her neck scarf bob across her shoulders as she headed toward the stove, and I decided Mrs. Brentwood was really a pile of garments condemned for eternity to tumble around in a clothes dryer. She never stopped moving. I suppose being a widow with the work of two people made her like that.

During the first year I minded Jeremy she used to sit down for a few minutes to chat with me, but I guess her pressures have increased and she wants to get things done so she can relax at night. I discussed Mrs. Brentwood's aloofness with Mom one day when she was feeling fairly good and she told me that Mrs. Brentwood might resent the affection Jeremy has for me. That's a possibility but I doubt it because Jeremy adores her. He lights up like a summer sky when he sees her walk in. When I come in, he smiles and gets the Lego box.

I fingered the yellow Lego in my pocket and said goodbye. Any sleuthing into the source of Jeremy's aversion to blond-haired men would have to be done solo because Mrs. Brentwood couldn't handle the anxiety of knowing that something was troubling Jeremy. He's everything to her. On my way home I zeroed in on Jeremy's life to see if I could figure out where he met the man with the yellow hair. I was just about up our driveway when it hit me. School. A teacher who was pushing him too hard. I'd find out who he was and talk to him.

The next day I dialed St. Andrew's School. Nervously I plunged into the story I had made up. To the woman who answered the phone I said, "Listen, last week I was at a party and I met a very interesting man who said he could get material for me for a paper I'm doing for school. I was so excited about it that I forgot to find out his name. I do remember that he taught school and I think at St. Andrew's. I was wondering if he might be on your faculty. He has blond hair."

I counted off four seconds before the woman responded. With a

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lilt in her voice that tipped me off to the fact that she didn't believe the part about the material for a paper, she said, "No, dear, there's no man on our faculty with blond hair. Sorry, and uh, good luck on your paper."

The next day I suggested to Jeremy that we take a walk, hoping that we might encounter someone in the neighborhood with blond hair to whom Jeremy would react. We covered every street within a six-block radius of his house and we saw only a little girl with blonde hair. Feeling rather guilty for dragging Jeremy all over the neighborhood, I decided to bring him to my house for milk and chocolate cake.

He must have been really tired because he walked up my hilly street as if it were the final leg of the climb to the top of Mount Everest. When we reached my next-door neighbor's sidewalk, he sat down on the pavement and studied a crocus that had poked up in the ground near the curb.

"Get up, Jeremy, and come into my house. I've got some cake for you," I coaxed.

Jeremy sniffed at the flower.

"I'll pick the flower and we'll put it in a glass of water in my house, okay?"

Jeremy didn't budge.

"You always like to come to my house, Jeremy. What's the matter with you?" I asked as I pulled at his sleeve.

Jeremy stroked the flower.

A car pulled up to the curb. I straightened up and let go of Jeremy's jacket. My father got out of the car.

"Problems?" he asked.

"Sort of," I said. "Jeremy doesn't want to come in. I guess I'll have to take him home."

"He's already on his way," my father said.

I turned around and saw Jeremy walking down the street. When I caught up with him, I took his hand. Together we walked in silence back to his house. An insight was stirring in my head like a mole trying to burrow out of a dark tunnel.

"Edgar Allan Poe," I said to Jeremy as I dropped him off.

"Edgar Allan Poe," said Jeremy as he entered his house.

We'll have a new game, I thought, as I started on another walk, a thinking walk. We'll say Edgar Allan Poe to each other instead of goodbye. It's *The Purloined Letter* all over again, I told the absent Jeremy. The evidence is right in front of your eyes and you

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miss it. You see a person every day and you lose the awareness of an outstanding feature someone else would notice right away, a feature like blond hair, very blond hair for a forty-year old man who uses a hair-color lightener that his wife taunts him about when she screams at him during an argument.

My father was the Lego Man with yellow hair that Jeremy threw across the room. That's why Jeremy didn't want to come into our house and why he walked away when Dad drove up.

Knowing the answer to Jeremy's problem with the yellow Lego created new problems for me, hurting problems that had to be dealt with like cuts that must be swabbed with stinging antiseptics. Why did Jeremy dislike my father who had always been attentive and kind whenever I brought Jeremy to our house? Why did Jeremy back away from my father at the curb as if Dad were an intruder on Jeremy's visit with the crocus? Intruder!

I walked up the path to the old gray house that was flanked by two menacing evergreens whose branches extended across the front of the entire house. No one had lived there for years and a For Sale sign had recently appeared on the lawn. I sat down cross-legged on the rotting porch and started to peel bits of faded gray paint from its floor, expecting at any moment to hear cries of pain from the violated house.

Intruder! My father was the intruder into Jeremy's orderly life. The circle of Jeremy's life had been trisected into Mrs. Brentwood-school-me. Now a tangent had affixed itself to that circle, a tangent Jeremy wanted to erase. My father had met Mrs. Brentwood many times on rainy days when he picked me up on his way home from work. Somehow each of them had communicated their loneliness in unspoken messages. All those evenings when my father told Mother who had drifted into the twilight fringes of sleep from her pills that he was going to his office, or to a civic meeting, or to his card session, he was driving the four blocks to Jeremy's house.

A neighbor might have recognized Dad's car and hinted to my mother that Dad was having an affair without naming the woman, adding another demon to my mother's morning terrors, a demon she unleashed by shrieking, "You're seeing another woman." I understood then why Mrs. Brentwood walked past me each afternoon as if I were a Lego person propped against the sofa; she couldn't look at me without feeling ashamed.

Did she feel ashamed when Jeremy, a light sleeper, got up dur-

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ing the night for a glass of water and saw the man with the yellow hair with his mother? Couldn't she sense that Jeremy didn't like that intruder in the night? Did she put Jeremy back to bed as if he were a Lego person to be dropped into its box? "Oh, Mrs. Brentwood, Mrs. Brentwood," I wailed to the evergreens that suddenly swayed in the wind. I got up from the porch, leaving behind a mound of peeled paint, and continued on my walk.

By the time I reached home I knew what I had to do. Mrs. Brentwood must stop seeing my father, not for my sake or my mother's sake, but for Jeremy's. Talking to Mrs. Brentwood would be as futile as conversing with laundry swinging on a clothesline. She'd never stop moving long enough to listen to me. I patted the mailbox on the corner of my street. There were other methods of communication. That night I stenciled my first letter to Mrs. Brentwood, using an alphabet sheet from my elementary school days. It read:

St. Andrew's School might like to know that the mother of one of its special children is morally unfit.

Admiring my work, I slipped the letter into a typed envelope and mailed it at the corner.

The following afternoon I constructed a large Lego fort for the soldier I had made Jeremy. Delighted with it, he asked me to stay after his mother came home. Pretending mild annoyance, I sighed and positioned myself on the floor next to the kitchen doorway so I could watch Mrs. Brentwood open my letter. It was important for me to know if the letter had any impact. It did.

After reading it, she sank into a chair and put her head in her hands. Then she folded the letter and put it into her skirt pocket before quietly assembling the pots on the stove. When I left, she stood staring into a pot of soup as if it contained a floating alphabet that would spell out a solution to her problem.

As I expected, my father received a call that night on his business phone in the study.

"Something came up and I have to go back to the office," he told Mother without looking at her.

"Business affairs always come first with you," she snapped, stressing the word "affairs."

She started up the stairs and tripped on the hem of the long bathrobe she wore day and night. I helped her to her room and read mechanically to her until she fell asleep. My mind skittered to Jeremy's house where I mentally eavesdropped on the strategy

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meeting prompted by my letter. In my imagination the meeting ended with Mrs. Brentwood's tearful dismissal of my father from her life. I went downstairs to do the dishes and I waltzed around the kitchen with dancing-partner plates.

For three afternoons I studied Mrs. Brentwood for a clue to her decision. She scurried about the kitchen and seemed the same person she was before receiving the letter. I began to wonder if her relationship with my father had been dissolved. I know I've done some terrible things since I found out about my father and Mrs. Brentwood, but what I did to Jeremy that afternoon was the worst. After making him a Lego man without a hat, I reached into my coat pocket and took out the yellow Lego piece I had never thrown away. Very deliberately I put it on the Lego man's head. Jeremy grabbed the figure from my hand and threw it across the room. I had very cruelly found out what I wanted to know. My father was still coming to the Brentwood house.

My mind shifted to another imaginary scene, that of my father telling Mrs. Brentwood that one crank letter was nothing to get upset over. Comforted by his assurances, she had dismissed the letter and not him from her life. Another letter was necessary, a letter that specified the offense that made her an unfit mother.

That night I mailed a letter that read:

St. Andrew's School might like to know about your affair with someone's husband right in your own home in front of your child.

That letter had an impact, an impact that shattered the Lego world in which we lived. Picking up the pieces will take a lot of time.

A re-run occurred when my father's phone rang on the day Mrs. Brentwood received the second letter. He said he had to return to the office and left the house. My mother stormed up to bed. I sat with her and then started in on the dishes. A half hour later my father returned and went directly upstairs. I heard shouting from my mother's bedroom. I stood frozen beneath the deafening sounds like a person lying within the tracks over which a subway train roars by. Never in all my years of listening to arguments did I hear sounds like those because it was my father's subway-train shouts I was hearing, not my mother's high-pitched screams.

"Don't you deny you wrote those letters with that stencil," he yelled. "They're exactly the kind of childish trick your sick mind would come up with. I've had enough of you and your stupid games. This is the end of it, do you hear me? The end!"

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"I don't know what you're talking about. Don't come near me, don't come near me," she shrieked.

The shot sounded like the derailment of a gigantic train. I put down the dish I was holding and noticed it had a chip in it. I walked into the dining room and noticed a grease stain on the wallpaper. I passed through the living room to the green-carpeted steps and noticed little balls of dust on each step. In the hallway leading to my mother's room I noticed that a picture hung crookedly. At the door to her room I traced with my finger the course of a paint drop that had eluded the brush and dried near the doorknob. When I couldn't think of anything else for my mind to linger over in a desperate maneuver to fend off reality, I opened the door.

My father, so white and still, was lying on the floor. The left sleeve of his shirt was drenched with blood. My mother stood next to him, rocking back and forth on her heels and crooning an incomprehensible song.

I took the gun from her hand and put it back into the nightstable drawer where it had been kept as a protection against intruders. When my father had lunged at her, she shot the intruder into Jeremy Brentwood's life. I called an ambulance and sat down on the floor with Mother who rocked me and sang to me while I sobbed, "I wrote the letters. I wrote the letters."

Mother is doing well now and will come home from the psychiatric hospital in a few weeks. The doctors are amazed at her recovery which began on the day my father and I visited her after his discharge from the hospital. When she saw him, she stopped singing that terrible song and listened to him tell her that he told the police that she had mistaken him for a burglar. When he put his uninjured arm around her and hugged her gently, some of his life seemed to be infused into her limp body.

My father never receives calls on his business phone at home any more. He plays cards with me every night. I have to shuffle the deck all the time but I don't mind. When I tried to apologize to him for writing the letters to Mrs. Brentwood, he did a strange thing—he apologized to me.

"Your mother and I treated you like one of those toy people you used to make for Jeremy, as if you didn't have feelings or needs. Your mother was sick and can be excused. There was no excuse for me."

Mrs. Brentwood now lives in an apartment in a neighboring

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suburb. On moving day she called and asked me if I'd sit with Jeremy while she was busy with the movers. When I got there, she waved to me from behind a stack of cartons. She bustled about the whole time, acting as if nothing had happened.

It was so great being with Jeremy again that I made him the best Lego person ever. A cowboy. Jeremy loved him. He guided the cowboy up the mountains of rolled-up rugs and down into the valleys of the bare hardwood floors. I loved watching him play.

Jeremy seemed to enjoy moving day. With his cowboy on his lap, his eyes followed each piece of furniture that was carried out to the van. I was really happy that moving day didn't upset him but I wondered why it didn't. He doesn't understand, I thought, the finality of it. He doesn't understand that he'll never come back here and that we'll never again build Lego people on this floor. He doesn't know that this is the end of an era in his life.

When Mrs. Brentwood called him to come to the car, he put the cowboy into the Lego box. Before he got to the car, he handed me the box. I held it for him as he opened the car door. When he was seated, I put the box on his lap. He picked it up and pushed it through the window to me.

"For you," said Jeremy as the car pulled away from the curb.

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an "impossible crime" by

JOHN DICKSON CARR

We'll let this story speak for itself:

"But the smell of the past was in that house; and you could not get over the idea that somebody was following you about."

"He saw a man hacked to death, with thirteen stab wounds in his body, from a hand that wasn't there. . ."

"The weapon wasn't hidden anywhere, and yet nobody could see it?"
"That's right."
"An invisible weapon?"
"Yes . . . A quite literally invisible weapon."

PERSONS OR THINGS UNKNOWN

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

"After all," said our host, "it's Christmas. Why not let the skeleton out of the bag?"

"Or the cat out of the closet," said the historian, who likes to be precise even about clichés. "Are you serious?"

"Yes," said our host. "I want to know whether it's safe for anyone to sleep in that little room at the head of the stairs."

He had just bought the place. This party was in the nature of a housewarming; and I had already decided privately that the place needed one. It was a long, damp, high-windowed house, hidden behind a hill in Sussex. The drawing room, where a group of us had gathered round the fire after dinner, was much too long

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and much too drafty. It had fine paneling—a rich brown where the firelight was always finding new gleams—and a hundred little reflections trembled down its length, as in so many small gloomy mirrors. But it remained drafty.

Of course, we all liked the house. It had the most modern of lighting and heating arrangements, though the plumbing sent ghostly noises and clanks far down into its interior whenever you turned on a tap. But the smell of the past was in it; and you could not get over the idea that somebody was following you about. Now, at the host's flat mention of a certain possibility, we all looked at our wives.

"But you never told us," said the historian's wife, rather shocked, "you never told us you had a ghost here!"

"I don't know that I have," replied our host quite seriously. "All I have is a bundle of evidence about something queer that once happened. It's all right; I haven't put anyone in that little room at the head of the stairs. So we can drop the discussion, if you'd rather."

"You know we can't," said the Inspector, who, as a matter of strict fact, was an Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. He smoked a large cigar, and contemplated ghosts with satisfaction. "This is exactly the time and place to hear about it. What is it?"

"It's rather in your line," our host told him slowly. Then he looked at the historian. "And in your line, too. It's a historical story. I suppose you'd call it a historical romance."

"I probably should. What is the date?"

"The date is the year sixteen hundred and sixty."

"That's Charles the Second, isn't it, Will?" demanded the historian's wife; she annoys him sometimes by asking these questions. "I'm terribly fond of them. I hope it has lots of big names in it. You know, Charles the Second and Buckingham and the rest. I remember, when I was a little girl, going to see"—she mentioned a great actor—"play David Garrick. I was looking forward to it. I expected to see the program and the cast of characters positively bristling with people like Dr. Johnson and Goldsmith, and Burke and Gibbon and Reynolds, going in and out every minute. There wasn't a single one of them in it, and I felt swindled before the play had begun."

The trouble was that she spoke without conviction. The historian looked skeptically over his pince-nez.

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"I warn you," he said, "if this is something you claim to have found in a drawer, in a crabbed old handwriting and all the rest of it, I'm going to be all over you professionally. Let me hear one anachronism—"

But he spoke without conviction, too. Our host was so serious that there was a slight, uneasy silence in the group.

"No. I didn't find it in a drawer; the parson gave it to me. And the handwriting isn't particularly crabbed. I can't show it to you because it's being typed, but it's a diary—a great hefty mass of stuff. Most of it is rather dull, though I'm steeped in the Seventeenth Century, and I confess I enjoy it. The diary was begun in the summer of '60—just after the Restoration—and goes on to the end of '64. It was kept by Mr. Everard Poynter, who owned Manfred Manor—that's six or seven miles from here—when it was a farm.

"I know that fellow," he added, looking thoughtfully at the fire. "I know about him and his sciatica and his views on mutton and politics. I know why he went up to London to dance on Oliver Cromwell's grave, and I can guess who stole the two sacks of malt out of his brew-house while he was away. I see him as half a Hat; the old boy had a beaver hat he wore on his wedding day, and I'll bet he wore it to his death. It's out of all this that I got the details about people. The actual facts I got from the report of the coroner's inquest, which the parson lent me."

"Hold on!" said the Inspector, sitting up straight. "Did this fellow Poynter see the ghost and die?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. But he was one of the witnesses. He saw a man hacked to death, with thirteen stab wounds in his body, from a hand that wasn't there and a weapon that didn't exist."

There was a silence.

"A murder?" asked the Inspector.

"A murder."

"Where?"

"In that little room at the head of the stairs. It used to be called the Ladies' Withdrawing Room."

Now, it is all very well to sit in your well-lighted flat in town and say we were hypnotized by an atmosphere. You can hear motor cars crashing their gears, or curse somebody's radio. You did not sit in that house, with a great wind rushing up off the downs, and a wall of darkness built up for three miles around

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you, knowing that at a certain hour you would have to retire to your room and put out the light, completing the wall.

"I regret to say," went on our host, "that there are no great names. These people were no more concerned with the Court of Charles the Second—with one exception—than we are concerned with the Court of George the Sixth. They lived in a little, busy, possibly ignorant world. They were fierce, fire-eating Royalists, most of them, who cut the Stuart arms over their chimney-pieces again and only made a gala trip to town to see the regicides executed in October of '60. Poynter's diary is crowded with them. Among others there is Squire Radlow, who owned this house then and was a great friend of Poynter. There was Squire Radlow's wife, Martha, and his daughter Mary.

"Mistress Mary Radlow was seventeen years old. She was not one of your fainting girls. Poynter—used to giving details—records that she was five feet tall, and thirty-two inches round the bust. 'Pretty and delicate,' Poynter says, with hazel eyes and a small mouth. But she could spin flax against any woman in the county; she once drained a pint of wine at a draft, for a wager; and she took eager pleasure in any good spectacle, like a bear-baiting or a hanging. I don't say that flippantly, but as a plain matter of fact. She was also fond of fine clothes, and danced well.

"In the summer of '60 Mistress Mary was engaged to be married to Richard Oakley, of Rawndene. Nobody seems to have known much about Oakley. There are any number of references to him in the diary, but Poynter gives up trying to make him out. Oakley was older than the girl; of genial disposition, though he wore his hair like a Puritan, and a great reader of books. He had a good estate at Rawndene, which he managed well, but his candle burned late over his books; and he wandered abroad in all weathers, summer or frost, in as black a study as the Black Man.

"You might have thought that Mistress Mary would have preferred somebody livelier. But Oakley was good enough company, by all accounts, and he suited her exactly—they tell me that wives understand this.

"And here is where the trouble enters. At the Restoration, Oakley was looking a little white. Not that his loyalty was exactly suspect, but he had bought his estate under the Commonwealth. If sales made under the Commonwealth were now declared null and void by the new Government, it meant ruin for Oakley; and also, under the businesslike standards of the time, it meant the

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end of his prospective marriage to Mistress Mary.

"Then Gerald Vanning appeared.

"Hoy, what a blaze he must have made! He was fresh and oiled from Versailles, from Cologne, from Bruges, from Brussels, from Breda, from everywhere he had gone in the train of the formerly exiled king. Vanning was one of those 'confident young men' about whom we hear so much complaint from old-style Cavaliers in the early years of the Restoration. His family had been very powerful in Kent before the Civil Wars. Everybody knew he would be well rewarded, as he was.

"If this were a romance, I could now tell you how Mistress Mary fell in love with the handsome young Cavalier, and forgot about Oakley. But the truth seems to be that she never liked Vanning. Vanning disgusted Poynter by a habit of bowing and curvetting, with a superior smile, every time he made a remark. It is probable that Mistress Mary understood him no better than Poynter did.

"There is a description in the diary of a dinner that Squire Radlow gave to welcome him here at this house. Vanning came over in a coach, despite the appalling state of the roads, with a dozen lackeys in attendance. This helped to impress the Squire, though nothing had as yet been settled on him by the new regime. Vanning already wore his hair long, whereas the others were just growing theirs. They must have looked odd and patchy, like men beginning to grow beards, and rustic enough to amuse him.

"But Mistress Mary was there. Vanning took one look at her, clapped his hand on the back of a chair, bowed, rolled up his eyes, and began to lay siege to her in the full-dress style of the French king taking a town. He slid *bons mots* on his tongue like sweetmeats; he hiccoughed; he strutted; he directed killing ogles. Squire Radlow and his wife were enraptured. They liked Oakley of Rawndene—but it was possible that Oakley might be penniless in a month. Whereas Vanning was to be heaped with preferments, a matter of which he made no secret. Throughout this dinner Richard Oakley looked unhappy, and 'shifted his eyes.'

"When the men got drunk after dinner, Vanning spoke frankly to Squire Radlow. Oakley staggered out to get some air under the apple trees; what between liquor and crowding misfortunes, he did not feel well. Together, among the fumes, Vanning and Squire Radlow shouted friendship at each other, and wept. Vanning swore he would never wed anybody but Mistress Mary, not if his

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soul rotted deep in hell as Oliver's. The Squire was stern, but not too stern. 'Sir,' said the Squire, 'you abuse my hospitality; my daughter is pledged to the gentleman who has just left us; but it may be that we must speak of this presently.' Poynter, though he saw the justice of the argument, went home disturbed.

"Now, Gerald Vanning was not a fool. I have seen his portrait, painted a few years later when periwigs came into fashion. It is a shiny, shrewd, razorish kind of face. He had some genuine classical learning, and a smattering of scientific monkey tricks, the new toy of the time. But, above all, he had foresight. In the first place, he was genuinely smitten with hazel eyes and other charms. In the second place, Mistress Mary Radlow was a catch. When awarding bounty to the faithful, doubtless the King and Sir Edward Hyde would not forget Vanning of Mallingford; on the other hand, it was just possible they might.

"During the next three weeks it was almost taken for granted that Vanning should eventually become the Squire's son-in-law. Nothing was said or done, of course. But Vanning dined a dozen times here, drank with the Squire, and gave to the Squire's wife a brooch once owned by Charles the First. Mistress Mary spoke of it furiously to Poynter.

"Then the unexpected news came.

"Oakley was safe in his house and lands. An Act had been passed to confirm all sales and leases of property since the Civil Wars. It meant that Oakley was once more the well-to-do son-in-law, and the Squire could no longer object to his bargain.

"I have here an account of how this news was received at the manor. I did not get it from Poynter's diary. I got it from the records of the coroner's inquest. What astonished us when we read these chronicles is the blunt directness, the violence, like a wind, or a pistol clapped to the head, with which people set about getting what they wanted. For, just two months afterwards, there was murder done."

Our host paused. The room was full of the reflections of firelight. He glanced at the ceiling; what we heard up there was merely the sound of a servant walking overhead.

"Vanning," he went on, "seems to have taken the fact quietly enough. He was here at the manor when Oakley arrived with the news. It was five or six o'clock in the afternoon. Mistress Mary, the Squire, the Squire's wife, and Vanning were sitting in the Ladies' Withdrawing Room. This was, and is, the room at the

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head of the stairs—a little square place, with two 'panel' windows that would not open. It was furnished with chairs of oak and brocade, a needlework frame, and a sideboard chastely bearing a plate of oranges, a glass jug of water, and some glasses.

"There was only one candle burning, at some distance from Vanning, so that nobody had a good view of his face. He sat in his riding coat, with his sword across his lap. When Oakley came in with the news, he was observed to put his hand on his sword; but afterwards he 'made a leg' and left without more words.

"The wedding had originally been set for the end of November; both Oakley and Mistress Mary still claimed this date. It was accepted with all the more cheerfulness by the Squire, since, in the intervening months, Vanning had not yet received any dazzling benefits. True, he had been awarded £500 a year by the Healing and Blessed Parliament. But he was little better off than Oakley; a bargain was a bargain, said the Squire, and Oakley was his own dear son. Nobody seems to know what Vanning did in the interim, except that he settled down quietly at Mallingford.

"But from this time curious rumors began to go about the countryside. They all centered round Richard Oakley. Poynter records some of them, at first evidently not even realizing their direction. They were as light as dandelion clocks blown off, but they floated and settled.

"Who was Oakley? What did anybody know about him, except that he had come here and bought land under Oliver? He had vast learning, and more than a hundred books in his house; what need did he have of that? What had he been? A parson? A doctor of letters of physic? Or letters of a more unnatural kind? Why did he go for long walks in the wood, particularly after dusk?

"Oakley, if questioned, said that this was his nature. But an honest man, meaning an ordinary man, could understand no such nature. A wood was thick; you could not tell what might be in it after nightfall; an honest man preferred the tavern. Such whispers were all the more rapid-moving because of the troubled times. The broken bones of a Revolution are not easily healed.

"Then there was the unnatural state of the weather. In winter there was no cold at all: the roads dusty; a swarm of flies; and the rosebushes full of leaves into the following January.

"Oakley heard none of the rumors, or pretended to hear none. It was Jamy Achen, a lad of weak mind and therefore afraid of nothing, who saw something following Richard Oakley through Gal-

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lows Copse. The boy said he had not got a good look at it, since the time was after dusk. But he heard it rustle behind the trees, peering out at intervals after Mr. Oakley. He said that it seemed human, but that he was not sure it was alive.

"On the night of Friday, the twenty-sixth of November, Gerald Vanning rode over to this house alone. It was seven o'clock, a late hour for the country. He was admitted to the lower hall by Kitts, the Squire's steward, and he asked for Mr. Oakley. Kitts told him that Mr. Oakley was abovestairs with Mistress Mary, and that the Squire was asleep over supper with Mr. Poynter.

"It is certain that Vanning was wearing no sword. Kitts held the candle high and looked at him narrowly, for he seemed on a wire of apprehension and kept glancing over his shoulder as he pulled off his gloves. He wore jackboots, a riding coat half-buttoned, a lace band at the neck, and a flat-crowned beaver hat with a gold band. Under his sharp nose there was a little edge of mustache, and he was sweating.

" 'Mr. Oakley has brought a friend with him, I think,' says Vanning.

" 'No, sir,' says Kitts, 'he is alone.'

" 'But I am sure his friend has followed him,' says Vanning, again, twitching his head round and looking over his shoulder. He also jumped as though something had touched him, and kept turning round and round and looking sharply into corners as though he were playing hide-and-seek.

" 'Well!' says Mr. Vanning, with a whistle of breath through his nose. 'Take me to Mistress Mary. Stop! First fetch two or three brisk lads from the kitchen, and you shall go with me.'

"The steward was alarmed and asked what was the matter. Vanning would not tell him, but instructed him to see that the servants carried cudgels and lights. Four of them went abovestairs. Vanning knocked at the door of the Withdrawing Room and was bidden to enter. The servants remained outside, and both the lights and the cudgels trembled in their hands: later they did not know why.

"As the door opened and closed, Kitts caught a glimpse of Mistress Mary sitting by the table in the rose-brocade dress she reserved usually for Sundays, and Oakley sitting on the edge of the table beside her. Both looked round as though surprised.

"Presently Kitts heard voices talking, but so low he could not make out what was said. The voices spoke more rapidly; then

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there was a sound of moving about. The next thing to which Kitts could testify was a noise as though a candlestick had been knocked over. There was a thud; a high-pitched kind of noise; muffled breathing sounds and a sort of thrashing on the floor; and Mistress Mary suddenly beginning to scream over it.

"Kitts and his three followers laid hold of the door, but someone had bolted it on the inside. They attacked the door in a way that roused the Squire in the dining room below, but it held. Inside, after a silence, someone was heard to stumble and grope towards the door. Squire Radlow and Mr. Poynter came running up the stairs just as the door was unbolted from inside.

"Mistress Mary was standing there, panting, with her eyes wide and staring. She was holding up one edge of her full skirt, where it was stained with blood as though someone had scoured and polished a weapon there. She cried to them to bring lights; and one of the servants held up a lantern in the doorway.

"Vanning was half lying, half crouching over against the far wall, with a face like oiled paper as he lifted round his head to look at them. But they were looking at Oakley, or what was left of Oakley. He had fallen near the table, with the candle smashed beside him. They could not tell how many wounds there were in Oakley's neck and body; more than a dozen, Poynter thought, and he was right. Vanning stumbled over and tried to lift him up, but of course it was too late. Now listen to Poynter's own words:

" 'Mr. Radlow ran to Mr. Vanning and laid hold of him, crying: "You are a murderer! You have murdered him!" Mr. Vanning cried to him: "By God and His mercy, I have not touched him! I have no sword or dagger by me!" And indeed, this was true. For he was flung down on the floor by this bloody work, and ordered to be searched, but not so much as a pin was there in his clothes.

" 'I had observed by the nature of the wide, gaping wounds that some such blade as a broad knife had inflicted them, or the like. But what had done this was a puzzle, for every inch of the room did we search, high, low and turnover; and still not so much as a pin in crack or crevice.

" 'Mr. Vanning deposed that as he was speaking with Mr. Oakley, something struck out the light, and overthrew Mr. Oakley, and knelt on his chest. But who or what this was, or where it had gone when the light was brought, he could not say.' "

Bending close to the firelight, our host finished reading the

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notes from the sheet of paper in his hands. He folded up the paper, put it back in his pocket, and looked at us.

The historian's wife, who had drawn closer to her husband, shifted uneasily. "I wish you wouldn't tell us these things," she complained. "But tell us, anyway. I still don't understand. What was the man killed with, then?"

"That," said our host, lighting his pipe, "is the question. If you accept natural laws as governing this world, there wasn't anything that could have killed him. Look here a moment!"

For we were all looking at the ceiling.

"The Squire begged Mistress Mary to tell him what had happened. First she began to whimper a little, and for the first time in her life she fainted. The Squire wanted to throw some water over her, but Vanning carried her downstairs and they forced brandy between her teeth. When she recovered she was a trifle wandering, with no story at all.

"Something had put out the light. There had been a sound like a fall and a scuffling. Then the noise of moving about, and the smell of blood in a close, confined room. Something seemed to be plucking or pulling at her skirts. She does not appear to have remembered anything more.

"Of course, Vanning was put under restraint, and a magistrate sent for. They gathered in this room, which was a good deal bleaker and barer than it is today; but they pinned Vanning in the chimney corner of that fireplace. The Squire drew his sword and attempted to run Vanning through, while both of them wept, as the fashion was. But Poynter ordered two of the lads to hold the Squire back, quoting himself later as saying: 'This must be done in good order.'

"Now, what I want to impress on you is that these people were not fools. They had possibly a cruder turn of thought and speech; but they were used to dealing with realities like wood and beef and leather. Here was a reality. Oakley's wounds were six inches deep and an inch wide, from a thick flat blade that in places had scraped the bone. But there wasn't any such blade, and they knew it.

"Four men stood in the door and held lights while they searched for that knife—if there was such a thing—and they didn't find it. They pulled the room to pieces, and they didn't find it. Nobody could have whisked it out, past the men in the door. The windows didn't open, being set into the wall like panels, so nobody could

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have got rid of the knife there. There was only one door, outside which the servants had been standing. Something had cut a man to pieces; yet it simply wasn't there.

"Vanning, pale but calmer, repeated his account. Questioned as to why he had come to the house that night, he answered that there had been a matter to settle with Oakley. Asked what it was, he said he had not liked the conditions in his own home for the past month; he would beg Mr. Oakley to mend them. He had done Mr. Oakley no harm, beyond trying to take a bride from him, and therefore he would ask Mr. Oakley to call off his dogs.

"What dogs? Vanning explained that he did not precisely mean dogs. He meant something that had got into his bedroom cupboard, but was only there at night; and he had reasons for thinking Mr. Oakley had whistled it there. It had been there only since he had been paying attentions to Mistress Mary.

"These men were only human. Poynter ordered the steward to go up and search the little room again—and the steward wouldn't go.

"That little seed of terror had begun to grow like a mango tree under a cloth, and push up the cloth and stir out tentacles. It was easy to forget the broad smiling face of Richard Oakley, and to remember the curious 'shifting' of his eyes. When you recalled that, after all, Oakley was twice Mistress Mary's age, you might begin to wonder just whom you had been entertaining at bread and meat.

"Even Squire Radlow did not care to go upstairs again in his own house. Vanning, sweating and squirming in the chimney corner, plucked up courage as a confident young man and volunteered to go. They let him. But no sooner had he got into the little room than the door clapped again, and he came out running. It was touch-and-go whether they would desert the house in a body."

Again our host paused. In the silence it was the Inspector who spoke, examining his cigar and speaking with some skepticism. He had a common-sense voice, which restored reasonable values.

"Look here," he said, "are you telling us local bogy-tales, or are you seriously putting this forward as evidence?"

"As evidence given at a Coroner's Inquest."

"Reliable evidence?"

"I believe so."

"I don't," returned the Inspector, drawing the air through a hollow tooth. "After all, I suppose we've got to admit that a man was

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murdered, since there was an inquest. But if he died of being hacked or slashed with thirteen wounds, some instrument made those wounds. What happened to that weapon? You say it wasn't in the room; but how do we know that? How do we know it wasn't hidden away somewhere, and they simply couldn't find it?"

"I think I can give you my word," said our host slowly, "that no weapon was hidden there."

"Then what the devil happened to it? A knife at least six inches in the blade, and an inch broad—"

"Yes. But the fact is, nobody could see it."

"It wasn't hidden anywhere, and yet nobody could see it?"

"That's right."

"An invisible weapon?"

"Yes," answered our host, with a curious shining in his eyes. "A quite literally invisible weapon."

"How do you know?" demanded his wife abruptly.

Hitherto she had taken no part in the conversation. But she had been studying him in an odd way, sitting on a hassock, and as he hesitated, she rose at him in a glory of accusation.

"You villain!" she cried. "Ooh, you unutterable villain! You've been making it all up! Just to make everybody afraid to go to bed, and because *I* didn't know anything about the place, you've been telling us a pack of lies—"

But he stopped her.

"No. If I had been making it up I should have told you it was a story." Again he hesitated, almost biting his nails. "I'll admit that I may have been trying to mystify you a bit. That's reasonable, because I honestly don't know the truth myself. I can make a guess at it, that's all. I can make a guess at how those wounds came there. But that isn't the real problem. That isn't what bothers me, don't you see?"

Here the historian intervened. "A wide acquaintance with sensational fiction," he said, "gives me the line on which you're working. I submit that the victim was stabbed with an icicle, as in several tales I could mention. Afterwards the ice melted—and was, in consequence, an invisible weapon."

"No," said our host.

"I mean," he went on, "that it's not feasible. You would hardly find an icicle in such unnaturally warm weather as they were having. And icicles are brittle: you wouldn't get a flat broad icicle of such steel-strength and sharpness that thirteen stabs could be

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made and the bone scraped in some of them. And an icicle isn't invisible. Under the circumstances, this knife was invisible—despite it's size."

"Bosh!" said the historian's wife. "There isn't any such thing."

"There is if you come to think about it. Of course, it's only an idea of mine, and it may be all wrong. Also, as I say, it's not the real problem, though it's so closely associated with the real problem that— But you haven't heard the rest of the story. Shall I conclude it?"

"By all means."

"I am afraid there are no great alarms or sensations," our host went on, "though the very name of Richard Oakley became a nightmare to keep people indoors at night. 'Oakley's friend' became a local synonym for anything that might get you if you didn't look sharp. One or two people saw him walking in the woods afterward; his head was on one side, and the stab wounds were still there.

"A grand jury of Sussex gentlemen, headed by Sir Benedict Skene, completely exonerated Gerald Vanning. The coroner's jury had already said 'persons or things unknown,' and added words of sympathy with Mistress Mary to the effect that she was luckily quit of a dangerous bargain. It may not surprise you to hear that eighteen months after Oakley's death she married Vanning.

"She was completely docile, though her old vivacity had gone. In those days young ladies did not remain spinsters through choice. She smiled, nodded, and made the proper responses, though it seems probable that she never got over what had happened.

"Matters became settled, even humdrum. Vanning waxed prosperous and respectable. His subsequent career I have had to look up in other sources, since Poynter's diary breaks off at the end of '64. But a grateful Government made him Sir Gerald Vanning, Bart. He became a leading member of the Royal Society, tinkering with the toys of science. His cheeks filled out, the slyness left his eyes, a periwig adorned his head, and four Flanders mares drew his coach to Gresham House.

"At home he often chose this house to live in when Squire Radlow died; he moved between here and Mallingford with the soberest grace. The little room, once such a cause of terror, he seldom visited; but its door was not locked.

"His wife saw to it that these flagstones were kept scrubbed,

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and every stick of wood was kept shining. She was a good wife. He for his part was a good husband; he treated her well and drank only for his thirst, though she often pressed him to drink more than he did. It is at this pitch of domesticity that we get the record of another Coroner's Inquest.

"Vanning's throat was cut on the night of the fifth of October, '67.

"On an evening of high winds he and his wife came here from Mallingford. He was in unusually good spirits, having just done a profitable piece of business. They had supper together, and Vanning drank a great deal. His wife kept him company at it. Didn't I tell you she once drank off a pint of wine at a draft for a wager? She said it would make him sleep soundly; for it seems to be true that he sometimes talked in his sleep.

"At eight o'clock, she tells us, she went up to bed, leaving him still at the table. At what time he went upstairs we do not know, and neither do the servants. Kitts, the steward, thought he heard him stumbling up that staircase out there at a very late hour. Kitts also thought he heard someone crying out, but a high October gale was blowing and he could not be sure.

"On the morning of the sixth of October a cowherd named Coates was coming round the side of this house in a sodden daybreak from which the storm had just cleared. He was on his way to the west meadow and stopped to drink at a rainwater barrel under the eaves just below the little room at the head of the stairs. As he was about to drink, he noticed a curious color in the water. Looking up to find out how it had come there, he saw Sir Gerald Vanning's face looking down at him under the shadow of the yellow trees.

"Sir Gerald's head was sticking out of the window, and did not move; neither did the eyes. Some of the glass in the window was still intact, though his head had been run through it, and—"

It was at this point that the Inspector uttered an exclamation.

It was an exclamation of enlightenment. Our host looked at him with a certain grimness, and nodded.

"Yes," he said. "You know the truth now, don't you?"

"The truth?" repeated the historian's wife, almost screaming with perplexity. "The truth about what?"

"About the murder of Oakley," said our host. "About the trick Vanning used to murder Oakley seven years before.

"I'm fairly sure he did it," our host went on, nodding reflec-

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tively. "Nothing delighted the people of that time so much as tricks and gadgets of that very sort. A clock that ran by rolling bullets down an inclined plane; a diving bell; a burglar alarm; the Royal Society played with all of them. And Vanning—study his portrait one day—profited by the monkey tricks he learned in exile. He invented an invisible knife."

"But see here—!" protested the historian.

"Of course he planned the whole thing against Oakley. Oakley was no more a necromancer or a consorter with devils than I am. All those rumors about him were started with a definite purpose by Vanning himself. A crop of whispers, a weak-minded lad to be bribed, the whole power of suggestion set going, and Vanning was ready for business.

"On the given night he rode over to this house, alone, with a certain kind of knife in his pocket. He made a great show of pretending he was chased by imaginary monsters, and he deliberately alarmed the steward. With the servants for witnesses he went upstairs to see Oakley and Mistress Mary. He bolted the door on the inside. He spoke pleasantly to them.

"When he had managed to distract the girl's attention, he knocked out the light, tripped up Oakley, and set upon him with that certain kind of knife. There had to be many wounds and much blood, so he could later account for blood on himself. The girl was too terrified in the dark to move. He had only to clean his knife on a soft but stiff-brocaded gown, and then put down the knife in full view. Nobody noticed it."

The historian blinked. "Admirable!" he said. "Nobody noticed it, eh? Can you tell me the sort of blade that can be placed in full view without anybody noticing it?"

"Yes," said our host. "A blade made of ordinary plain glass, placed in the large glass jug full of water standing on a sideboard table."

There was a silence.

"I told you about that glass water jug. It was a familiar fixture. Nobody examines a transparent jug of water. Vanning could have made a glass knife with the crudest of cutting tools; and glass is murderous stuff—strong, flat, sharp-edged, and as sharp-pointed as you want to make it. There was only candlelight, remember. Any minute traces of blood that might be left on the glass knife would sink as sediment in the water, while everybody looked straight at the weapon in the water and never noticed it.

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"But Vanning—you also remember?—prevented Squire Radlow from throwing water on the girl when she fainted. Instead he carried her downstairs. Afterwards he told an admirable series of horror tales; he found an excuse to go back to the room again alone, slip the knife into his sleeve, and get rid of it in the confusion."

The Inspector frowned thoughtfully. "But the real problem—" he said.

"Yes. If that was the way it was done, did the wife know? Vanning talked in his sleep, remember."

We looked at each other. The historian's wife, after a glance round, asked the question that was in our minds.

"And what was the verdict of *that* inquest?"

"Oh, that was simple," said our host. "Death by misadventure, from falling through a window while drunk and cutting his throat on the glass. Somebody observed that there were marks of heels on the board floor as though he might have been dragged there, but this wasn't insisted on. Mistress Mary lived on in complete happiness, and died at the ripe age of eighty-six, full of benevolence and sleep.

"These are natural explanations. Everything is natural. There's nothing wrong with that little room at the head of the stairs. It's been turned into a bedroom now; I assure you it's comfortable, and anyone who cares to sleep there is free to do so. But at the same time—"

"Quite," we said.

"Q"

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A *NEW* short-short by

TALMAGE POWELL

The Classified Column of many newspapers is often called "The Agony Column" . . .

CLASSIFIED

by TALMAGE POWELL

Rooms For Rent
Lonely widow, recently bereaved, will consider tenant for cheerful room, kitchen privileges. Must be companionable and willing to assist in care of fine old home in Rathmoor Estates. Phone 253-6655. Mrs. Thelma McCarson.

Household Goods For Sale
Moving to Rathmoor Estates. Must sell several pieces of furniture from bachelor apartment, including zebra rug, waterbed, beanbag chairs. Call 367-8765, ask for Larry Summers.

Personals
Marie, I didn't run out. Glommed a deal. Tried to call. You had moved. Am petting gray old pigeon. List your new address or phone number in Personals column as quickly as possible. L.

Personals
L.: 564-2380. I'd better be part of the big deal. M.

Wanted To Buy
Fully restored 1955 model Thunderbird with cloth top. Must have by April 14 for birthday gift to young friend who will be 28 on that date. His expressed desire. Price no object. Call Mrs. Thelma McCarson, 253-6655.

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Lost & Found
No questions asked for return of lady's purse taken from T-Bird parked at Foster Motel night of May 10. Keep money. Return papers, especially the reference qualifying bearer as maid in well-to-do home. Marie, 564-2380.

Employment Opportunities
Maid wanted for Rathmoor Estates home. Cheerful quarters, pleasant surroundings. Engaged couple sole occupants. Thursdays and Sundays off. Best pay. Call Mr. Larry Summers, 253-6655, who will arrange interview with employer.

Employment Opportunities
Need temporary caretaker, preferably with watchdog, to look after estate while occupants and maid travel for few weeks. Call 253-6655.

Announcements
Mr. and Mrs. Larry Summers have returned to their Rathmoor Estates home after honeymooning in Acapulco. Mrs. Summers is the former Mrs. Thelma McCarson. Friends are invited to call.

Employment Opportunities
Girl needed to do chores in Rathmoor Estates home, assistant to maid, freeing maid for other duties. Short hours, top pay. Call 253-6655 for interviews with Marie and employer.

Lost & Found
Must recover hubcaps taken from T-Bird while parked at Foster Motel on night of Sept. 21. No questions asked. Will pay reward. Call 253-6655 and hang up if Larry does not answer.

Wanted To Buy
A copy of "Toxicology, The Complete Encyclopedia of Poisons" by Harbison & Brackett. Will pay top price. Condition not important as long as contents complete. Box L-6 Chronicle-Times.

Lost & Found
Reward for return of package taken from trunk of T-Bird while parked at the Foster Motel the night of Oct. 26. Package contains book on poisons of interest only to students and book collectors.

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Will double antiquarian book market price for immediate return. No questions asked. Call 253-6655 and hang up if Larry doesn't answer.

Personals
To "Bookman": Terms satisfactory. Will have cash on hand for delivery of book at Pickens Park, bench near fountain, at 9 P.M. Saturday. L.

Wanted To Buy
Centrifuge, distillation equipment, small laboratory furnace for amateur experiments in basement lab by student of toxicology. Call 253-6655 and ask for Larry or leave message with Marie, housekeeper.

Announcements
Due to illness Mrs. Thelma McCarson Summers of Rathmoor Estates will not receive callers until further notice.

Positions Wanted
Assistant maid seeks employment. Efficient and willing worker. Box C-883 Chronicle-Times.

Employment Opportunities
Need fine craftsman and crew to clean out and restore basement in Rathmoor Estates home where explosion due to inexperienced handling of volatile chemicals resulted in severe damage and claimed lives of my husband and young housekeeper. Call 253-6655.

Announcements
Mrs. Thelma McCarson Summers, recovered from recent illness, is again receiving at her Rathmoor Estates home.

Autos For Sale
Classic T-Bird. Cheap. 253-6655.

"Q"

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"Q"

a *NEW* short story by

PETE HAMILL

What happens in the heart of an editor when he opens the morning mail and finds a new story by Pete Hamill? This Editor rejoices, especially when the tale begins in Rattigan's Bar and Grill in Brooklyn and sings the bold songs of Irish youth, full of jauntiness and laughter—and sorrow . . .

Pete Hamill was born in Brooklyn in 1935, attended schools in New York and Mexico City, and is now a nationally syndicated columnist for "The News" (New York's Picture Newspaper). His fiction and nonfiction have appeared in many major magazines, and as a journalist he has won the highly respected Meyer Berger Award of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism . . .

THE MEN IN BLACK RAINCOATS

by PETE HAMILL

It was close to midnight on a Friday evening at Rattigan's Bar and Grill. There were no ball games on the television, old movies only made the clientele feel more ancient, and the jukebox was still broken from the afternoon of Red Cioffi's daughter's wedding. So it was time for Brendan Malachy McCone to take center stage. He motioned for a fresh beer, put his right foot on the brass rail, breathed in deeply, and started to sing.

Oh, the Garden of Eden has vanished, they say,
But I know the lie of it still,
Just turn to the left at the bridge of Finaghy,
And meet me halfway to Coote Hill . . .

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The song was very Irish, sly and funny, the choruses full of the names of long-forgotten places, and the regulars loved Brendan for the quick jaunty singing of it. They loved the roguish glitter in his eyes, his energy, his good-natured boasting. He was, after all, a man in his fifties now, and yet here he was, still singing the bold songs of his youth. And on this night, as on so many nights, they joined him in the verses.

The boy is a man now,
He's toil-worn, he's tough,
He whispers, "Come over the sea,"
Come back, Patty Reilly, to Bally James Duff,
Ah, come back, Patty Reilly, to me . . .

Outside, rain had begun to fall, a cold Brooklyn rain, driven by the wind off the harbor, and it made the noises and the singing and the laughter seem even better. Sardines and crackers joined the glasses on the bar. George the bartender filled the empties. And Brendan shifted from jauntiness to sorrow.

If you ever go across the sea to Ireland,
Then maybe at the closing of your day . . .

The mood of the regulars hushed now, as Brendan gave them the song as if it were a hymn. The bar was charged with the feeling they all had for Brendan, knowing that he had been an IRA man long ago, that he had left Ireland a step ahead of the British police who wanted him for the killing of a British soldier in the Border Campaign. This was their Brendan: the Transit Authority clerk who had once stood in the doorways of Belfast, with the cloth cap pulled tight on his brow, the pistol deep in the pockets of the trenchcoat, ready to kill or to die for Ireland.

Oh, the strangers came and tried to teach us their ways,
And scorned us just for being what we are . . .

The voice was a healthy baritone, a wealth of passion overwhelming a poverty of skill, and it touched all of them, making the younger ones imagine the streets of Belfast today, where their cousins were still fighting, reminding the older ones of peat fires, black creamy stout, buttermilk in the morning. The song was

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about a vanished time, before rock and roll and women's liberation, before they took Latin out of the Mass, before the blacks and the Puerto Ricans had begun to move in and the children of the Irish had begun to move out. The neighborhood was changing, all right. But Brendan Malachy McCone was still with them.

A little after midnight two strangers came in, dressed in black raincoats. They were wet with the rain. They ordered whiskey. Brendan kept singing. Nobody noticed that his voice faltered on the last lines of *Galway Bay*, as he took the applause, glanced at the strangers, and again shifted the mood.

Oh, Mister Patrick McGinty.
An Irishman of note,
He fell into a fortune—and
He bought himself a goat . . .

The strangers drank in silence.

At closing time the rain was still pelting down. Brendan stood in the open doorway of the bar with Charlie the Pole and Scotch Eddie, while George the bartender counted the receipts. Everyone else had gone home.

"We'll have to make a run for it," Charlie said.

"Dammit," Scotch Eddie said.

"Yiz might as well run, cause yiz'll drown anyway," George said. He was finished counting and looked small and tired.

"I'll see you, gents," Charlie said, and rushed into the rain, running lumpily down the darkened slope of 11th Street to his home. Eddie followed, cutting sharply to his left. But Brendan did not move. He had seen the strangers in the black raincoats, watched them in the mirror for a while as he moved through the songs, saw them leave an hour later. And now he was afraid.

He looked up and down the avenue. The streetlamp scalloped a halo of light on the corner. Beyond the light there was nothing but the luminous darkness and the rain.

"Well, I've got to lock it up, Brendan."

"Right, George. Good night."

"God bless."

Brendan hurried up the street, head down, lashed by the rain, eyes searching the interiors of parked cars. He saw nothing. The cars were locked. He looked up at the apartments and there were

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no lights anywhere and he knew the lights would be out at home too, where Sarah and the kids would all be sleeping. Even the firehouse was dimly lit, its great red door closed, the firemen stretched out on their bunks in the upstairs loft.

Despite the drink and the rain, Brendan's mouth was dry. Once he thought he saw something move in the darkness of an areaway and his stomach lifted and fell. But again it was nothing. Shadows. Imagination. Get hold of yourself, Brendan.

He crossed the avenue. A half block to go. Away off he saw the twin red tail-lights of a city bus, groaning slowly toward Flatbush Avenue. Hurry. Another half block and he could enter the yard, hurry up the stairs, unlock the door, close it behind him, undress quickly in the darkened kitchen, dry off the rain with a warm rough towel, brush the beer off his teeth, and fall into the great deep warmth of bed with Sarah. And he would be safe again for another night. Hurry. Get the key out. Don't get caught naked on the stairs.

He turned into his yard, stepped over a spreading puddle at the base of the stoop, and hurried up the eight worn sandstone steps. He had the key out in the vestibule and quickly opened the inside door.

They were waiting for him in the hall.

The one in the front seat on the right was clearly the boss. The driver was only a chauffeur and did his work in proper silence. The strangers in the raincoats sat on either side of Brendan in the back seat and said nothing as the car moved through the wet darkness, down off the slope, into the Puerto Rican neighborhood near Williamsburg. They all clearly deferred to the one in the front seat right. All wore gloves. Except the boss.

"I'm telling you, this has to be some kind of mistake," Brendan said.

"Shut up," said the boss, without turning. His skin was pink in the light of the streetlamps, and dark hair curled over the edge of his collar. The accent was not New York. Maybe Boston. Maybe somewhere else. Not New York.

"I don't owe anybody money," Brendan said, choking back the dry panic. "I'm not into the bloody loan sharks. I'm telling you, this is—"

The boss said, "Is your name Brendan Malachy McCone?"

"Well, uh, yes, but—"

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"Then we've made no mistake."

Williamsburg was behind them now and they were following the route of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway while avoiding its brightly lit ramp. Brendan sat back. From that angle he could see more of the man in the front seat right—the velvet collar of his coat, the high protruding cheekbones, the longish nose, the pinkie ring glittering on his left hand when he lit a cigarette with a thin gold lighter. He could not see the man's eyes but he was certain he had never seen the man before tonight.

"Where are you taking me?"

The boss said calmly, "I told you to shut up. Shut up."

Brendan took a deep breath, and then let it out slowly. He looked to the men on either side of him, smiling his most innocent smile, as if hoping they would think well of him, believe in his innocence, intervene with the boss, plead his case. He wanted to tell them about his kids, explain that he had done nothing bad. Not for 30 years.

The men looked away from him, their nostrils seeming to quiver, as if he had already begun to stink of death. Brendan tried to remember the words of the Act of Contrition.

The men beside him stared out past the little rivers of rain on the windows, as if he were not even in the car. They watched the city turn into country, Queens into Nassau County, all the sleeping suburbs transform into the darker, emptier reaches of Suffolk County, as the driver pushed on, driving farther away, out to Long Island, to the country of forests and frozen summer beaches. Far from Brooklyn. Far from the Friday nights at Rattigan's. Far from his children. Far from Sarah.

Until they pulled off the expressway at Southampton, moved down back roads for another 15 minutes, and came to a marshy cove. A few summer houses were sealed for the winter. Rain spattered the still water of the cove. Patches of dirty snow clung to the shoreline, resisting the steady cold rain.

"This is fine," the boss said.

The driver pulled over, turned out the car lights, and turned off the engine. They all sat in the dark.

The boss said, "Did you ever hear of a man named Peter Devlin?"

Oh, my God, Brendan thought.

"Well?"

"Vaguely. The name sounds familiar."

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"Just familiar?"

"Well, there was a Devlin where I came from. There were a lot of Devlins in the North. It's hard to remember. It was a long time ago."

"Yeah, it was. It was a long time ago."

"Aye."

"And you don't remember him more than just vaguely? Well, isn't that nice? I mean, you *were* best man at his wedding."

Brendan's lips moved, but no words came out.

"What else do you vaguely remember, McCone?"

There was a long pause. Then: "He died."

"No, not *died*. He was killed, wasn't he?"

"Aye."

"Who killed him, McCone?"

"He died for Ireland."

"Who *killed* him, McCone?"

"The Special Branch. The British Special Branch."

The boss took out his cigarettes and lit one with the gold lighter. He took a long drag. Brendan saw the muscles working tensely in his jaw. The rain drummed on the roof of the car.

"Tell me some more about him."

"They buried him with full military honors. They draped his coffin with the Tricolor and sang *The Soldier's Song* over his grave. The whole town wore the Easter Lily. The B-Specials made a lot of arrests."

"You saw all this?"

"I was told."

"But you weren't there?"

"No, but—"

"What happened to his wife?"

"Katey?"

"Some people called her Katey," the boss said.

"She died too, soon after—the flu, was it?"

"Well, there was another version. That she died of a broken heart."

The boss stared straight ahead, watching the rain trickle down the windshield. He tapped an ash into the ashtray, took another deep drag, and said, "What did they pay you to set him up, Brendan?"

He called me Brendan. He's softening. Even a gunman can understand it was all long ago.

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"What do you mean?"

"Don't play games, Brendan. Everyone in the North knew you set him up. The British told them."

"It was a long time ago, Mister. There were a lot of lies told. You can't believe every . . . "

The boss wasn't really listening. He took out his pack of cigarettes, flipped one higher than the others, gripped its filter in his teeth, and lit it with the butt of the other. Then he tamped out the first cigarette in the ashtray. He looked out past the rain to the darkness of the cove.

"Shoot him," he said.

The man on Brendan's left opened the door a foot.

"Oh, sweet sufferin' Jesus, Mister," Brendan said. "I've got five kids. They're all at home. One of them is making her first Communion. Please. For the love of God. If Dublin Command has told you to get me, just tell them you couldn't find me. Tell them I'm dead. I can get you a piece of paper. From one of the politicians. Sayin' I'm dead. Yes. That's a way. And I'll just vanish. Just disappear. Please. I'm an old man now. I won't live much bloody longer. But the weans. The weans, Mister. And it was all thirty years ago. Christ knows I've paid for it. Please. Please."

The tears were blurring his vision now. He could hear the hard spatter of the rain through the open car door. He felt the man on his right move slightly and remove something from inside his coat.

The boss said, "You left out a few things, Brendan."

"I can send all my earnings to the lads. God knows they can use it in the North now. I've sent money already, I have, to the Provisionals. I never stopped being for them. For a United Ireland. Never stopped. I can have the weans work for the cause. I'll get a second job. My Sarah can go out and work too. Jesus, Mister . . . "

"Katey Devlin didn't die of the flu," the boss said. "And she didn't die of a broken heart. Did she, Brendan?"

"I don't—"

"Katey Devlin killed herself. Didn't she?"

Brendan felt his stomach turn over.

The boss said, very quietly, "She loved Peter Devlin more than life itself. She didn't want him to die."

"But neither does Sarah want *me* to die. She's got the weans, the feedin' of them, and the clothin' of them, and the schoolin' of

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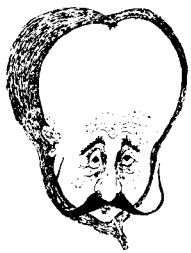
them to think of. Good God, man, have ye no mercy? I was a boy then. My own people were starvin'. We had no land, we were renters, we were city people, not farmers, and the war was on, and . . . They told me they would only arrest him. Intern him for the duration and let him out when the fightin' stopped, and they told me the IRA would take care of Kate while he was inside. Please, Mister, I've got five kids. Peter Devlin only had *two*."

"I know," said the man in the front seat right. "I was one of them."

For the first time he turned completely around. His eyes were a cold blue under the shock of curly dark hair. Kate's eyes in Peter's face. He stared at Brendan for a moment. He took another drag on the cigarette and let the smoke drift through his nose, creating lazy trails of gray in the crowded car.

"Shoot him," he said.

The man on his left touched Brendan's hand and opened the door wide.



DETECTIVERSE

SHADES OF GRAY

by MARK GRENIER

In his search for solutions, Hercule is abetted
By the little gray cells that they jell in,
And the felons he catches are likewise indebted
For the little gray cells that they dwell in.

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a NEW Dr. Sam Hawthorne story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Dr. Sam Hawthorne, the retired New England practitioner, fishes again in the stream of his old memories, and this time he catches the bizarre story of a man "stabbed to death while alone in the voting booth, with no less than eight people watching from outside, and with a knife that seemed to have vanished into thin air." A baffling problem—the kind of brain-twister and brain-boggler that we have come to associate with old Doc Sam's remembrances of "impossible crimes" past . . .

THE PROBLEM OF THE VOTING BOOTH

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"Well, it's another Election Day," Dr. Sam Hawthorne said, pouring the drinks. "Elections always remind me of the voting booth murder back in Northmont. It was November of 1926, and Sheriff Lens was runnin' for re-election. I suppose it was about the most impossible-seemin' murder I ever came up against. A little—ah—libation before I start? . . .

I remember it rained on Election Day that year and Sheriff Lens was worried the weather might keep a lot of his supporters at home. He'd waged a hard-fought campaign against a challenger named Henry G. Oatis—a newcomer to Northmont who'd had some law-enforcement experience down south but then moved north after the death of his wife. Of course we still used paper ballots in those days. Only a few of the big cities had voting machines back in '26, though they'd been authorized for use in elections since 1892. You know, it was Thomas Edison who invented the voting machine back in 1869—the first invention he

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ever patented—though it was lots different from the machines they use today.

Anyway, Northmont still used paper ballots. You gave 'em your name, signed the voting book, and they handed you a ballot. You went into the curtained booth to make your marks, then deposited the ballot in a slotted box just outside the booth. It was a simple system and it worked just fine, 'cept when the polls closed it sometimes took half the night to count all the ballots accurately and come up with a winner.

This day, as I said, it was raining.

Not a gentle spring-like rain, but the sort of drivin' New England rain that comes so often in the fall, bringin' down what's left of the leaves and being generally unpleasant. Because of the rain I'd driven April, my nurse, to the polling place in the back of Whitney's Barber Shop. Truth to tell, even if it hadn't been rainin' she'd have wanted me to come along.

"Imagine it, Dr. Sam! They give women the vote and then make us go to a barber shop to cast our ballot!"

I smiled and tried to calm her down. "Well, April, it's not that bad. The north end of town's votin' in the schoolhouse, and we'd be votin' in the Town Hall if it wasn't for all the repairs going on. Will Whitney's a selectman and it was mighty nice o' him to let the town use his barber shop for a polling place."

"It's not just here, Dr. Sam. I read in the papers that women in New York and Chicago often have to vote in places like barber shops."

"At least they don't have to vote in saloons. Prohibition took care of that."

We pulled up in front of Will Whitney's shop and April put up her umbrella against the driving rain. I drove around back and parked in a lot already pockmarked with puddles. Then I ran for the back door, hoping I wouldn't get too wet.

"Need an umbrella this mornin'," a voice greeted me as I came through the door. It was Sheriff Lens himself, looking fat and happy and trying not to show his nervousness.

"What you doing here, Sheriff?" I asked. "A little illegal electioneerin'?"

"Naw, this fella from the newspaper wants a picture o' me and Oatis shakin' hands outside the votin' booth. Silly idea, but I gotta go along with it."

The fella from the newspaper was a young photographer named

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Manny Sears, recently come to town, whom I'd encountered of late taking pictures of everything from prize steers to Mrs. Kelly's triplets. I shook his hand and watched while he went about the business of loadin' flash powder into its holder. It reminded me of the bandstand killin', where flash powder had played so important a part. "Don't you ever get tired of snapping pictures, Manny?"

He grinned boyishly at me. "Sure don't, Dr. Sam. Photographs in newspapers are the coming thing. Even *The New York Times* is using them on their front page sometimes, in place of drawings."

"So you're going to have the winner and the loser shakin' hands."

"That's right. Friendly enemies, you might say."

April had taken off her raincoat and was shaking the moisture from her umbrella. Both the party workers behind the desk were friends of hers, and she was settling down for a chat. One of them, Mrs. Morgano, was an occasional patient of mine. I knew she was a Republican like Sheriff Lens. The other woman, Ida Fry from the dry-goods store, must have been the Democrat.

We seemed to be the only ones who'd arrived to vote, though Will Whitney was busy cutting the hair of a customer in the front of the shop. The customer was a man I didn't know, and I wondered what brought a stranger to Northmont on a rainy Election Day.

"Well, I'm gonna vote," April said, accepting a lengthy ballot from the ladies behind the desk. Besides the candidates for sheriff and selectmen, there were a number of local ordinances to be voted on. And at the top of the ballot, ahead of everything, were the statewide offices. It wasn't a presidential year, but we were electing a governor and a senator, as well as our local congressman.

Reading and marking the paper ballot was time-consumin', and April was in there a full two minutes before emerging to drop her folded paper into the slotted box on her left. "Did you vote the right way?" I asked with a smile.

"I voted against everyone who was in now—'cept Sheriff Lens, of course."

The sheriff beamed and started to thank her, but was interrupted by the arrival of his opponent. Henry G. Oatis stormed in like the wind-driven rain behind him, stampin' soggy shoes on the barber-shop floor. He removed his glasses to wipe them, squinting near-sightedly at the gathering.

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"I'm here to take your picture, Mr. Oatis," the young photographer announced, holding his camera and flash high. "I want the two of you together here by the booth."

For the moment Henry Oatis ignored him, turnin' instead to Will Whitney by his barber chair. "Don't let that razor slip, Will. I can't afford to lose a single vote today." But when he replaced his glasses and saw the man in the chair more clearly, he seemed startled. "You're not from Northmont!"

"Just passin' through," the man mumbled, with what sounded to me like a southern accent.

Oatis turned away quickly and I wondered vaguely if he knew the man. Will Whitney flayed the air with his razor and bent once more to his task. And Ida Fry broke off a gossipy conversation with April to wave a ballot in the candidate's direction. "Henry, you come over here this instant and do your votin'! There's plenty of time for picture-takin' afterwards."

He gave a little bow in response. "Always willin' to bend to the will o' the party, Ida. How are you, Sheriff? Enjoyin' your last week in office?"

Sheriff Lens sputtered a bit. It had been a rough campaign, with Oatis charging Lens was "a do-nothin' country hick," and the Sheriff responding by branding Oatis as a carpetbagger in reverse. I could see their tempers hadn't mellowed any at the voting booth. The whole scene embarrassed me because I considered myself a good friend of the sheriff's and hated to see the degradation the campaign had brought upon him. Maybe it happened to all politicians when they had to go out and scrounge for votes, but it hit home with Sheriff Lens. He was a man afraid of losin' his job. It was as simple as that.

Oatis had slipped off his raincoat for the picture, but he still held the ballot that Ida Fry had handed him. The photographer was fussing at the booth, gettin' everything ready, but Oatis merely brushed by him. "Like I said, votin' first, pictures later."

He drew the heavy black curtain closed behind him and I could imagine him bending over the ballot, pencil in hand. "You want some coffee, Dr. Sam?" Mrs. Morgano asked, already pouring a cup.

"Don't mind if I do. It'll take the chill out of my bones."

Manny Sears had posted himself about ten feet in front of the voting booth, waiting with his camera and flash for Oatis to come out. Up front, Will Whitney left his barber chair and walked back

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to watch, leavin' his customer unattended for a moment. Sheriff Lens tried to ignore the whole thing by chatting with April and the other ladies. Outside, a shift in the wind had brought the rain beatin' against the barber-shop windows.

I could see Henry Oatis' legs beneath the black curtain as he marked his ballot, and after a few minutes it seemed he was taking unusually long with it. "How you comin' in there, Henry?" Ida Fry called out at last, when nearly five minutes had elapsed. "Need any help?"

"I'm just about finished," he called back. "Damned long ballot!"

There was another moment's wait and then he pushed the curtain aside to come out. He was holding the folded ballot in his left hand and the pencil in his right, and there was a look of immense surprise on his face.

He took two uncertain steps forward and I saw the blood on his shirt front. "Oatis, what is it?" I asked, springing forward to catch him as he started to fall. Behind me, young Manny Sears ignited his flash powder and got the picture.

I lowered Oatis gently to the floor and started rippin' open his shirt. "Murderer . . ." he managed to gasp. "Stabbed . . ."

Then he relaxed and his head fell to one side. I knew he was dead.

"Everyone keep back," I said. "This man's been murdered."

Despite his dying words, my first thought was that he'd been shot, maybe by one of those guns equipped with a Maxim silencer. But as soon as I uncovered the wound I saw that he'd been stabbed without doubt. The hole in his shirt front, and in the flesh beneath it, was nearly an inch long and quite narrow. It was a typical knife wound, in the region just below the heart. If the thrust was upward, the blade could easily have reached the heart.

"He was alone in the booth!" Sheriff Lens exclaimed. "No one coulda killed him in there!"

"I know." The others were crowding around and I motioned them back. "We have to find the knife," I said, "and I'd better do the lookin'. Sheriff, you stay at the front o' the shop with the others."

"Why can't I—?"

"Because somebody might think you killed him," I explained.

That shut him up, and I pulled the curtain wide to examine the voting booth. There was nothing inside except a wooden shelf

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with a couple of pencils on it—identical with the pencil Oatis still clutched in his right hand. I looked under the shelf and on the floor. I felt the black curtain to make sure a knife wasn't concealed in it, and then went around the back of the booth to look for a hole through which a knife blade could have thrust.

There was nothing.

The booth was solid wood on three sides, with the curtain on the fourth side, facing everybody. Inside there was nothing but the shelf for marking the ballot.

"All right," I said finally, stepping around the body on the floor. April had covered it with an extra piece of black curtain, but even that did not prevent Mrs. Morgano from drifting off into sobbin' hysterics. "You'd better take her out to my car," I told April, "till she recovers. The rain's let up now."

April helped the woman to her feet and Sheriff Lens lent a hand. "April," I said, calling her aside. "Sort of go over her dress and make sure she doesn't have the knife on her."

"You think—?"

"No, no! But we have to cover everything." After they'd gone I said to the others, "We've got to search every inch of this place for the knife that killed him. We're not goin' to know who or how till we find that knife."

"This is a barber shop," Will Whitney reminded us. "It's full o' razors an' scissors and the like. I couldn't work without 'em."

I agreed. "But I don't think any of 'em would have a blade wide enough to make this wound. Let's take a look."

We searched the place for twenty minutes, pulling open every drawer, measurin' the width of every pointed instrument we could find. We searched each other and we searched the corpse. We even looked in the hamper where Whitney threw his used towels after giving customers a shave, but there was no weapon hidden among the linens.

In the meantime voters were arriving again now that the rain had stopped. We had to keep them waiting outside, at least until the body could be removed, but the news of the candidate's death was soon spreading across town. There was a call from the mayor, and another from the county's election commissioner, and for a time the ringing of the telephone was like a discordant hymn in the background.

"He musta committed suicide," Sheriff Lens announced at one point. "There was nobody near him."

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"If he did he had to stab himself with this pencil," I said. "It's the sharpest thing he had on him. Besides, it's hardly likely he'd kill himself on the day he might be elected sheriff. He didn't enter that booth like a man in a state of depression."

"Okay," the sheriff agreed, "but then how'd anyone get near enough to stab him? We were all out here—Will Whitney with his customer, Mrs. Morgano and Ida behind their table, you and me and April in front of the booth, and that photographer waitin' to take his picture. None of us was anywhere near the booth."

"Knives can be thrown," I pointed out, "though it beats me how a thrown knife could have remained invisible to us all."

"Mebbe he was stabbed before he ever entered the votin' booth," Will Whitney volunteered, wipin' the dried soap from one of his razors. "Knew a fella over in Shinn Corners once got knifed in a brawl an' didn't even realize it at first."

But I couldn't go along with that. "Oatis stood in that booth almost five minutes makin' his ballot. He couldn't have lived that long with a wound to the heart—and besides, there'd have been a lot more blood than there was. No, he was stabbed either just before or just after leavin' that booth. He didn't live more than a minute."

"We was all lookin' right at the booth, though!" Sheriff Lens argued. "Sears here was even goin' to take a picture."

I suddenly remembered something. "You *did* take a picture, didn't you? Just at the instant he started to fall!"

The young photographer nodded. "Sure, I got one. That was before I realized he'd been stabbed."

"How long would it take you to develop it?" I asked.

"Oh, I could have a print in an hour or so."

"Then why don't you do just that? The picture could contain a valuable clue."

"You really think so?" He seemed excited for the first time since the killing. "I'd better get back to the paper with it."

April signaled me from the other side of the shop, where she was picking through the wet umbrellas lined against the wall. "I was just thinkin' the knife coulda been dropped in a folded umbrella, Dr. Sam."

"I already thought the same thing, but there's no knife there."

"You looked?"

"Sure. Now what was the signal for?"

"You're lettin' Manny Sears walk outa here without checkin'

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his camera."

"Camera? You mean—?"

"Couldn't he have a spring device to fire a knife through the lens openin'? Somethin' like that?"

"Then what happened to the knife?"

"It coulda been made of ice and melted."

"Not in two seconds, it couldn't. And no ice would be sharp enough to go through his shirt and skin like that. My God, April, what have you been readin'?"

"Nothing more violent than *Show Boat*," she insisted.

"Sounds more like Fu Manchu to me."

"No, really, Dr. Sam—haven't you noticed Manny's odd behavior?"

"He's done nothing that I could see."

"Exactly!" she exclaimed. "And *that* is his odd behavior!"

"Now I know what you've been reading—Sherlock Holmes!"

"Seriously, wouldn't he have raced back to his paper with that picture right away? Why's he hangin' around here?"

I had to admit she had a point. I went over and checked out his camera, but it was real enough—no openings for darts or knives. And when I asked him why he'd hung around this long he had an answer for that. "I thought Sheriff Lens might want some photographs of the scene of the crime, before they took the body away."

The sheriff heard him and nodded agreement. "Yeah, sure, take me a couple of pictures, son. They might come in handy."

I'd talked to everybody in the place except Will Whitney's strangely silent customer, and I wandered over to the barber chair where he was still sitting. "What'd you say your name was, mister?"

"Didn't say." He was maybe 35 or 40, with the look of an outdoorsman about him. "But it's Crocker. Hy Crocker."

"You live around here?"

"Nope."

"Just passin' through?"

"Might say that."

"You didn't know the dead man, did you? Henry Oatis?"

"How'd I know him? I only just got to town this mornin'."

"Most people like to be home to vote on Election Day."

"Never paid much mind to politics down my way."

"And where would that be, Mr. Crocker?"

"South o' here."

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"You in business?"

He nodded. "Dogs. I raise and train dogs."

"For hunting?"

"Yeah. And watchdogs. Keeps trespassers off your land." He took out a thin foreign-lookin' cigar and lit it, making no effort to leave the barber chair though Whitney had finished with him long ago. "Bloodhounds too. Maybe Sheriff Lens could use a bloodhound."

"I'll ask him, Mr. Crocker."

But I had more important things to ask the sheriff just then. They were finally removing the body, carefully edgin' the stretcher through the narrow front door, and the people waiting outside were crowdin' close. "Better clear them out of there, Sheriff," I warned. "This isn't a sideshow."

But when Lens yelled at one of the farmers from the hill, the man yelled right back. "That's one way to win an election—right, Sheriff?"

Lens was not a man to let an implication like that go unchallenged. "I'll find the man that killed Oatis, never you fear!"

"What if you lost the election, Sheriff?" another heckler joined in.

"If I lost the election I'll resign and let them call a new election to fill the spot. I don't want the job if the people don't want me."

That seemed to quiet 'em for the moment, and the ambulance pulled away with the body of Henry G. Oatis inside. With its departure the place returned to a semblance of normality. The voters, impatient from their long wait, crowded into the shop, keeping Ida Fry and Mrs. Morgano busy with the registration books.

April came up to me holding a pencil. "You want this, Dr. Sam? I pried it outa the dead man's hand before they took him away. No sense his bein' buried holdin' a pencil."

"No sense indeed." I turned it over between my fingers, but it was just an ordinary wooden pencil identical to the one I'd used to mark my own ballot. It could not have been used to stab a man to death.

"Who do you think killed him?" April asked. "An' how?"

"An invisible man with an invisible knife."

"Sheriff Lens?"

"No. Lens wouldn't commit murder. He may not be the smartest sheriff in the state, but he stands for law and order above all else. Besides, I think he honestly expects to be reelected today."

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"Who else is there?"

"The mysterious dog trainer, Mr. Hy Crocker."

"Why him?"

I shrugged. "He's a stranger in town. There had to be a motive for Oatis' murder and the most likely time for that motive is in the past. Oatis hasn't been here long enough to make enemies in Northmont—not the sort of enemies who'd kill him in such a devious way, anyhow."

April took up the suggestion of Crocker's involvement enthusiastically. "Should I follow him an' see where he goes?"

"Don't we have any patients today?"

"Only old Mrs. Foster an' when she saw the rain this morning she called in to postpone it for a week. Said her wagon would get stuck in the mud."

"All right," I agreed. "Keep an eye on Crocker and see where he goes. I'm going to stroll over to the newspaper and see if Manny Sears has those pictures developed yet."

Though the rain had stopped, the skies that Tuesday afternoon were a long way from clearing. Great gray clouds hung on the horizon, thrustin' their thunderheads at us from the west. It would rain again, I knew, and soon.

The office of the *Northmont Bee* was busier than I'd ever seen it. Men were on the phones, spreading details of the murder to the big-city dailies in Boston and New York. The publisher, Ed Andrews, was looking over the headline for the evening edition. Generally the *Bee* appeared only three times a week, on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, but the murder of a candidate for sheriff in a town voting booth rated a special edition.

"Howdy, Doc," Andrews said. "You were on the scene agin, weren't you? Gonna come up with a solution this time?"

"We'll see."

"Manny says he got a flash picture."

"I hope he did. Is it ready yet?"

"They're developing it now."

I remembered Hy Crocker and my theory of something from the past. "Tell me about Oatis, Ed. What's his background?"

The publisher shrugged. "Come up here from North Carolina 'bout a year ago. He was police chief down there, in a town a little bigger than this. His wife died and he wanted a fresh start, wanted to get away from his old memories."

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I grunted. Oatis hadn't seemed too old. "How'd she die?"

"Who?"

"Mrs. Oatis. Professional curiosity. If she was his age she wasn't very old."

"You're right," he agreed, consulting a printed obit. "She was thirty-eight. Killed in a house burglary two years ago. They caught the guy—a tramp passin' through—and hanged him. He broke into the house lookin' for food and stabbed her."

"Did the tramp confess?"

"How the hell do I know if he confessed? I'm just readin' you what's here, Doc."

I saw Manny Sears coming across the room with a couple of wet prints, holding them gingerly by the edges. "Here are the pictures."

I glanced casually at the one he'd taken at Sheriff Lens's request, showing the sprawled body of Oatis, then turned my attention to the picture taken as Oatis left the voting booth. The black splotch of blood on his chest was just beginning to form, and his face was frozen into that surprised look I remembered so well. The knees seemed to be saggin' just a bit, and the fingers of his left hand were thrown wide as if he was grabbin' for support.

It was the moment before death, the moment just after the knife had penetrated—and yet there was no knife visible anywhere in the picture.

Our eyes had not deceived us. Henry G. Oatis had been stabbed to death while alone in the voting booth, with no less than eight people watching from outside, and with a knife that seemed to have vanished into thin air.

I went back to Will Whitney's barber shop and waited till there was a lull in the voting. Then I asked Ida Fry and Mrs. Morgano if I could examine the voting booth again.

"Don't know what you expect to find in there," Ida Fry said, pulling the curtain open for me. "We even mopped up the blood so's it wouldn't upset anybody."

I bent to examine the wooden shelf on which the ballots were marked. It was about the height of my stomach, and I could imagine a knife blade springing out of it to stab Henry Oatis and then being pulled back into its secret slot by some mechanical device.

It was a good idea but a wrong one. The shelf was solid wood.

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I was leavin' the barber shop by the back door when I heard the growling of dogs and a woman's scream. I couldn't be sure, but it sounded like April.

I ran across the rutted parking area, jumping puddles of muddy water, and came out of the back street. April was on the ground about halfway up the block, tryin' to fight off two ugly German shepherds.

I yanked off my raincoat and wrapped it around my left arm as I ran, then waded into the thick of it, using my padded arm to ward off the lunges of the dogs. April had all but given up the fight, crawling away to protect herself from the snapping jaws. I dragged her free, fighting back the dogs, until suddenly a sharp whistle called them off.

April lifted her tear-streaked face from the ground and I saw the marks of the dogs' savage attack. "I have to get you to a hospital."

"It was Crocker's truck, Dr. Sam! I was tryin' to see what was inside and the dogs got loose."

"I'll take care of Crocker later," I told her. I could see him standin' across the street, putting a leash on the dogs.

I helped her to her feet and washed off the teeth marks, treatin' them with an antiseptic till I could get her to the hospital. My first thought was for April, but then I wanted to get back and take a look at Hy Crocker's truck.

By the time I returned from the hospital the rain had started again—a fine annoying drizzle that seemed to soak through to the bones. April was restin' comfortably at the hospital, where they'd decided to keep her overnight in case she had any bad reaction to the treatment. I was sure the dogs weren't rabid, and I hated to subject her to the long and arduous series of inoculations with Pasteur serum unless it was necessary. But I did want to have another look at those dogs, preferably when they were standin' still.

Crocker had made no effort to leave town after his dogs attacked April, and I found him over at Dixie's lunch counter drinkin' a cup of coffee. The coffee at Dixie's was often spiked with some good Canadian whiskey, but I couldn't tell about his cup.

"Hello there, Dr. Hawthorne," he greeted me. "Sorry about your nurse. How is she?"

"Alive, no thanks to those hounds of yours."

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"They're trained to guard my property. I called them off as soon as I saw what was happening."

"I'd better take a look at them. They could be rabid."

"*My* dogs?" He laughed at me. "Healthiest animals around. But come on, look all you want."

He finished his coffee and went outside, leading me around the corner to the lot where the truck was parked. The dogs were back inside now, growlin' and snappin' as I approached.

"What's in the truck that's so valuable?" I asked.

"Nuthin'." But he made no effort to unlock the door.

I was losing my patience with him. "Look here, Crocker, I could have Sheriff Lens arrest you on an assault charge right now! My nurse is in the hospital thanks to those dogs of yours. She could have been killed."

"No, no, these dogs aren't trained to kill."

"But maybe their master is. Maybe you followed Henry Oatis up here from the south and killed him."

"He wasn't killed by no dogs. He was killed by a knife." He smiled slyly at me. "And don't forget I was sittin' in that there barber chair all the time."

"I'm rememberin'." I was rememberin' something else too—about Henry Oatis' murdered wife. She'd been stabbed like him, and I wondered if today's crime was tied in somehow with that one two years back. "Open up the truck," I told Crocker. "I still need to examine your dogs."

"They got no rabies."

"I'll be the judge of that. Open up or I'll have the sheriff arrest you and shoot both your dogs."

He opened the door reluctantly, bringing out the two big German shepherds. They gave a couple of low growls in my direction, but I could see he knew how to control them. I could also see, with a sudden flash of illumination, the reason for Hy Crocker's mysterious behavior. The front end of the truck was piled high with cases of bootleg whiskey, thinly disguised in boxes marked *Maple Syrup*.

"Wrong time of the year to be runnin' maple syrup," I told him with a knowing smile.

"What you goin' to do about it?"

"Nothing."

The dogs seemed healthy enough, and I was no defender of the 18th Amendment. As long as the attack on April hadn't been in-

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tentional I saw no reason to involve myself in his affairs. Besides, the sight of that whiskey had just about flip-flopped me on the subject of Crocker's involvement in the murder. A man arriving in a strange town to do a killin' doesn't run the risk of fillin' his truck with bootleg hooch.

I'd have to look elsewhere for Oatis' killer.

The rain fell in a maddening drizzle throughout the early evening hours, discouraging many voters who'd delayed their trip to Will Whitney's barber shop. There was no way of knowin' how many stayed away because of the killing; but when the polls closed at nine o'clock and Ida Fry unlocked the ballot box in the presence of Mrs. Morgano and the county elections inspector, there were only 197 ballots.

"That's less than last year," Mrs. Morgano remarked, checking the number against the voter list she'd been keeping.

"Bad weather," Sheriff Lens suggested.

"And murder," Ida Fry added. Her face had gone suddenly white, as if the memory of the day's events had finally drained the life from her.

"Count 'em," the sheriff urged. "I want to see if I got beaten by a dead man."

"We'll need the votes from the schoolhouse too," Mrs. Morgano reminded them. "They usually get a bigger turnout from the north end o' town."

Though the barber shop itself had been closed since six o'clock, Will Whitney had come back after dinner to lock up the building after the women completed their ballot counting. He stood now near the front of the shop, leaning on the barber chair where Hy Crocker had been seated during the killin'.

Certainly Will couldn't have done it. Not from that far away.

I tried to focus my mind on the problem. Forget the invisible knife, forget everything else except who was closest to Oatis at the moment of death. And hadn't Will Whitney taken a few steps toward the booth?

Manny Sears, raising his camera and flash.

Ida Fry and Mrs. Morgano, behind their table.

Sheriff Lens with April and me.

Will Whitney givin' a shave to Hy Crocker.

"Here's the results," Ida Fry announced. "It's 133 for Sheriff Lens, 61 for Henry Oatis, and 2 invalid."

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I remembered the photograph Sears had taken of Oatis as he emerged from the booth and started to fall.

"That's only 196, Ida," Mrs. Morgano said.

I remembered the thing that was missing from the photograph, the thing I should have noticed at once.

"Sure, 196." And I knew in that instant how Henry G. Oatis had been killed.

"But there were 197 voters. We've got them all numbered."

"I don't care," Sheriff Lens said. "I'm just happy I won. I'd 'a been spooked if Oatis come out ahead of me!"

The election commissioner reached for the telephone to check with the other polling place while Ida Fry and Mrs. Morgano disputed the missing ballot. "I think I can help you find it, ladies," I said.

"You can?" Mrs. Morgano said, seeming surprised.

I turned to Ida Fry. "Ida—"

"It's official!" the election commissioner shouted. "Final totals are 345 for Sheriff Lens and 228 for Oatis!"

"Ida," I said, repeating her name. "You've got to give us the knife. You can't protect him any longer. There's no reason to protect him any longer."

"I—" Her face had gone dead-white again as I spoke, and I could see she was near to breaking.

Sheriff Lens was by my side, and every eye in the place was on me. "You mean Ida killed him?"

"Of course not. I mean that Henry Oatis committed suicide, and hid the knife in the one place we never looked."

"We looked everywhere!" Sheriff Lens insisted. "In fact, we looked everywhere twice!"

"We looked everywhere except one place—a place where we were forbidden by law to look."

"Where in hell was that?"

"The ballot box."

Sometime in the midst of it all Manny Sears returned to take pictures.

Everybody was talkin' at once, trying to sort out what must have happened, and Ida Fry brought a moment of silence when she reached under the table to produce a short, wide-bladed hunting knife with a flat hilt covered by tape.

"Ida!" Mrs. Morgano screeched. "Where'd you get that?"

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I answered the question for her. "Out of the ballot box. I saw Ida's face go white as she was takin' out the ballots, but it didn't occur to me that she'd felt the knife inside one of 'em and realized what had happened."

"Just what *did* happen?" Sheriff Lens asked.

"Henry G. Oatis went into that booth and stabbed himself, and maybe we'll never be sure of the real reason for it. Maybe he thought he was goin' to lose the election and couldn't face it. Anyway, he stabbed himself and slipped the knife inside his folded ballot. You'll notice the thick handle had been removed from the knife and the hilt covered with tape. And the long ballot was big enough, even when folded, to hide the length of this fairly short knife."

"And we never saw it?"

"We never *noticed* it," I corrected. "Everyone came out of that booth and dropped their folded ballot in the box. We saw Oatis with the ballot in his hand, but then our attention was distracted by the blood on his chest. We never saw what happened to the ballot, but since Manny Sears's photograph clearly shows the open fingers of his left hand an instant later, he could only have dropped it into the ballot box, along with the knife.

"Actually we should have known there was something suspicious about Oatis right away. He came out of that votin' booth with the pencil in one hand and the folded ballot in the other. Now he had to put down the pencil to fold the ballot, so why'd he pick it up again? It could only have been to make it seem both his hands were occupied—to get us away from the idea he could have stabbed himself."

Manny Sears flashed his powder again, taking a picture of the knife.

"He musta known we'd find the knife when the votes were counted," Sheriff Lens said.

"I think he counted on Ida here behaving just the way she did. For the good of the party she hid the knife and said nothing. With Ida and Mrs. Morgano both removin' the ballots, he had a fifty-fifty chance she'd find the knife first. But he forgot one thing—his ballot had bloodstains from the knife on it, and Ida had to hide it along with the knife itself. This made the count come out wrong—one too few."

"So there was no murderer," the sheriff said. "Just a bizarre suicide. But what about that Hy Crocker?"

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"A bootlegger passin' through town. He had no connection with it."

They settled down after that, Ida Fry to a soft sobbing sound, the others trying to comfort her, Sheriff Lens to the quiet celebration of his victory. I left them and walked down the street with Manny Sears.

"You got some good pictures today," I said.

"You bet!"

"I have to ask you somethin', Manny."

He glanced up at the sky. The rain had stopped and I suppose he was searchin' for stars. "What's that, Doc?"

"Did you know he'd kill himself when you left the knife there for him to find?"

"Huh?"

"A man doesn't commit suicide for no reason while in the act of voting for himself for public office. He commits suicide if he suddenly realizes his secret's been found out. That knife with its taped handle was a very special one, wasn't it? Without even checkin' the newspaper files I'll bet it's the knife that killed Oatis' wife two years ago in North Carolina—or one made to look just like it."

Manny Sears was silent for a time. Finally he said, "Oatis did it, Doc. He killed his wife and blamed it on a passing tramp who'd broken into the house looking for food. They hanged the tramp. He was my brother."

It was my turn to be silent. When I spoke, I said, "So you came up north after Oatis and confronted him with it on Election Day—the day he hoped to start a new career and a new life."

"How'd you know, Doc?"

"Oatis took a long time in that booth, decidin' what to do after he found the knife. It was unusual-lookin' with its taped handle and I figured it had a special meaning to him. If I was right and the knife was left on the shelf in that voting booth for him to find, only you could have left it there. I remembered you fussin' with the booth just before Oatis went in. And it explained why you were so anxious for a picture of Oatis as he emerged from the booth. The picture of guilt."

"I didn't think he'd kill himself, Doc. I was hopin' he'd go to pieces and confess."

"He almost did. The surprise of dying brought the words *murderer* and *stabbed* to his lips. He was talkin' about killing his

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wife." I shook my head wonderingly. "But his pride still made him hide the knife. He couldn't face the accusations, but even in death he tried to disguise his final despairing act."

"What will you do, Doc?"

The stars were coming out now. I could see them overhead. "Me? Nothing. Go to the hospital and see April. There's no need to tell the whole story to anyone."

"And so it never got told till now," Dr. Sam Hawthorne said. "It was one of our little secrets, up in Northmont. I see your glass is empty and it's gettin' late. Another little—ah—libation? No? But come by again next week and I'll tell you about another crime—an honest-to-goodness murder this time. It didn't happen till the summer after the voting booth affair, and I was just beginning to think crime had passed Northmont by at last. But then there was the county fair, and a time capsule with a body inside it . . . "

"Q"

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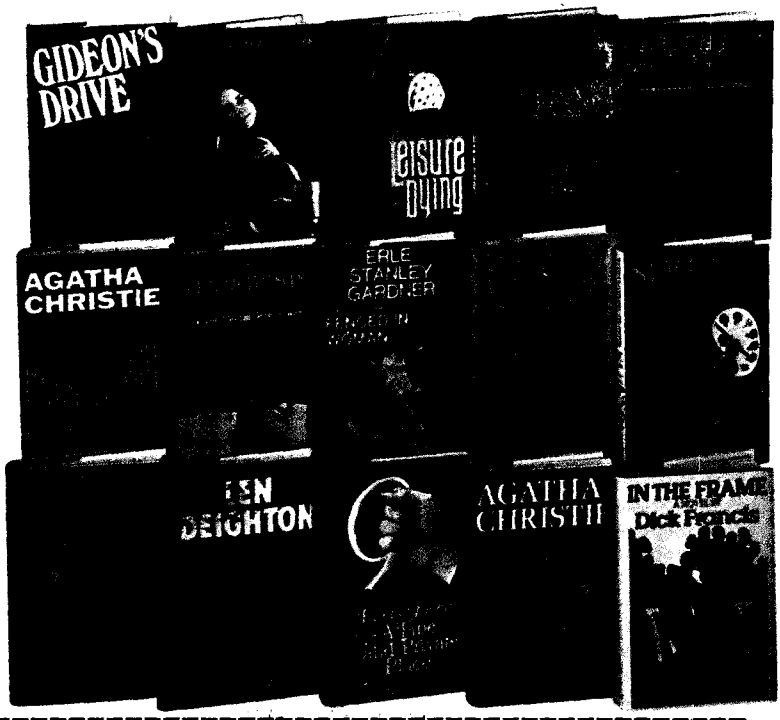

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